fly, fly away
my sorrow
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Zak Lylak

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Many psychiatrists and psychologists refuse to entertain the idea that society as a whole may be lacking in sanity. They hold that the problem of mental health in a society is only that of the number of 'unadjusted' individuals, and not of a possible unadjustment of the culture itself.

From The Sane Society by Eric Fromm

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1. Jump

Have you ever thrown a ball for a dog, only to have it sit motionless, seemingly wondering what's going on? People with low intelligence assume the dog is stupid. But often, it's because the dog is smart. It knows what it's supposed to do, it just doesn't see the point. By the age of eighteen, Ariran understood those dogs. He didn't want to chase the ball any more.

Seventy-two broad, wooden steps led up to the empty bioLab. Then, thirteen paces from the bioLab door to the window ledge. Eighty-five squeaks from the rubber soles of his dishevelled, black boots. He took a moment to catch his breath. The skolOpticon smelled of history. A cool, dusty aroma, laced with polish and pride. Not a smell Ariran could identify with. This was not his place. He had no place. A lifetime of struggle and servitude lay in waiting. A crazy world constructed by madmen, maintained by zombies. He toyed with the idea of turning all the gas taps on. Going out with a bang would be thrilling. But he'd no desire to hurt anybody else and let the thought dissolve.

The old sash window slid open with a rattle and creak. Ariran clambered out and crouched on the narrow, sandstone ledge. Looking down at the hard tarmac, forty feet below, induced a sublime feeling of tranquillity. He was committed to making the leap and felt truly free for the first time in his life. The lethal mixture he'd mixed with his morning tea was coursing through his blood; powdered apaPi root, deMetaMal™, and histaBlox™. There was no turning back. The secret would die with him.

He wondered what they'd say when they found the crumpled, bloody corpse. The thothTechs and the parents. A waste. A tragedy. Such potential. They'd wonder why he hadn't sought help. Why nobody noticed his troubles. They'd

search for answers. But only superficially. Without evidence, they'd settle on simple concepts. Mental imbalance. Pressure. Drugs. Hormones. Bullying. Any answer would do, so long as it could be mumbled in one nebulous sentence and didn't require a more thorough examination of life. His people, the kutKish, were terrified of lifting the stone of consciousness and facing the filthy, squirming mass beneath.

Ariran knew his death would be little more than a brief interruption to the daily habits of those around him. Soon enough, things would settle back the way they were. Joyless lives constructed from routine rituals. He envied them in a way. There were clear benefits to such a docile, comfortable existence. Travelling from childhood to youth, to young adulthood and onward, across the decades, without ever encountering questions too great or too pertinent. A life where the struggle and pain seemed worthwhile. How wonderful to be a member of that disorderly crowd of braggarts and flag wavers, impelled by truffles of emotion and floggings of desire, jostling between tables in a casino of garbage, each cashing in their chips for an empty, black sack on departure.

A cool, brisk breeze blew his long, white fringe sideways. The heat leached out through his thin polyCloth shirt and grey cottoCloth dungarees. Already numb with poison, Ariran was oblivious to the temperature. Gentle rays of sunlight filtered through the foliage of a nearby guRanzi tree, casting fuzzy puddles of yellow warmth onto his pale face. A dotenWing perched on a narrow branch nearby. Its little head jerked and twitched with curiosity as it watched the boy on the window ledge. After a few seconds, it lifted its head and began to sing. A strange mix of high-pitched squeaks and clacks, like a rusty door hinge, amidst the frantic clapping of tiny castanets. Ariran smiled at the bird and winked. *Consider the dotenWings*, he mused wryly. *They do not sow nor reap.*

The dotenWing hopped to another branch. Ariran almost lost his balance watching it. Fear kicked him in the stomach. The ground seemed so far away. No doubt, this was the end. Suddenly, there was a flurry of noise from the bioLab

entrance. Two girls had entered. Pleasant, plain-faced mekaZien girls. Lustrous skin, the colour of fresh pine. Ariran didn't know them well. They were almost as shy as he was. He panicked. His heart scrambled up his throat. The girls' eyes danced playfully, their delicate lips seemed desperate to explore. They stirred up a living desire; that dreadful yearning he sought to escape. He had to jump now. No more dalliance.

The girls looked at Ariran nervously, unsure what he was doing in such a precarious position. It was dangerous and out of character for one so quiet. One girl looked down and fumbled nervously in her bag. The other kept her eyes on him. 'Don't jump!' she blurted out with a nervous laugh. That was his cue. He crouched on his feet, legs like taut bow strings, mustering his will into a tight ball of intention. Then, he snapped his legs straight with an energetic explosion that propelled him up and away from the building.

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2. Broken

The drop seemed to last forever. As it hurtled toward the ground, Ariran's body realized what he'd done. Involuntarily, the mouth let out a pathetic whimper. The arms grasped for a thin branch dangling from an overhanging tree. With the force of his weight, it bent and snapped. The feet hit the tarmac first. A deep thud. A loud pop. The air pockets in the soles of his boots exploded. Heels and ankle bones shattered. Legs crumpled at the knees. Spine folded sharply with a crunch. Outstretched hands hit the floor. Then his chin. His body rolled to one side.

For a moment, he was very still. He looked around. The tarmac under his cheek. The wall of the building several metres away. Three bricks up from the ground, and dispersed evenly, were ornate, ceramic airbricks. He'd never noticed them before. They looked beautiful. Nearer to his head, he saw a pineapple weed poking through a crack in the tarmac. A yellow-green crown of a thousand tiny disc-florets. What a miracle of nature!

Ariran felt no pain, just an eerie lightness. Like gravity had lost its grip on him. He speculated he was dead, and waited for his consciousness to separate from his corpse and float away. Nothing happened. Awareness returned to his body. Tingling. He wiggled his fingers. Lifted an arm. After a few moments, he decided he actually felt quite alive. It seemed miraculous. Had he fallen so far with barely an injury? He took a deep breath and tried to stand. When he did, the pain kicked in. A cattle prod shock jolted his body. A sharp dagger stabbed his spine. His ankles, molten balls of lava. Instantly, he flopped back to the ground, groaning in agony. Any slight movement lanced him with torturous pain. The only option was to lay motionless.

Above him was the tree. The one his body had grasped at

as he was falling. Beside him was the broken branch. He burst out laughing. An uncontrollable laughter from deep within. What a ridiculous attempt his body had made to save itself! Each convulsion of laughter brought new waves of pain radiating out from his spine and up from his feet. It felt like his entire body from the neck down was immersed in boiling oil. Ariran cleared his mind. Focused on the pain. Brought his laughter under control. Then he remembered Doug Havishan. That sucked the humour out of him. A name he'd never forget. The dotenWing perched on the ledge he'd jumped from. Twitchy, angular glances. It was still watching him. Suddenly, it let out a raucous cackle, quite unlike any sound Ariran had heard from a dotenWing before. *Doo-oo-oo-G-g-g-Ha-ha-ha-ha, Doo-oo-oo-G-Ha-ha-va-va-vi-shan.*

First on the scene were some students from Ariran's class. Then a thothTech. He saw blood on Ariran's hand and rolled up his sleeve to check his arm. 'Goodbye' was cut into the wrist with a razor. The thothTech's forehead crumpled. His unruly grey eyebrows quivered. The head thothTech appeared next. Usually a commanding figure, now he looked small and ordinary; slightly crumpled, head bowed. A crowd gathered. Lisa, a kind and attractive girl, stepped forward to lay her blazer over Ariran to help keep him warm. He didn't feel cold, but the gesture was heart-felt. The soft lining smelled of light, floral body spray with subtle overtones of female body odour and laundry conditioner. Ariran breathed deeply, savouring the aroma.

Others copied Lisa's gesture. He was buried in a pile of skolOpticon blazers. They blotted out his broken body with a mound of cloth. A giant, deformed tortoise shell. Pale face poking out. Twisted with agony. It was a ritual display of compassion. The first blazer was meaningful. The rest, mimicry. This was how religions started. Ariran remembered he'd taken an overdose. The jump hadn't killed him. The pills probably would. And if the pills didn't do it, the apaPi root most certainly would. This was his funeral. Burial by blazer.

The thothTech prevented the addition of any more blazers, and requested that those who'd lain theirs down retrieve

them. The ritual reversed. Soon, there was just one blazer left. Sweet-smelling Lisa's. She left it there until the mediReps arrived. Her breasts brushed gently against his chin when she bent down to pick it up. She stood for a moment to look into his eyes, her gaze filled with tenderness. Ariran could see up her skirt. A taut white thong. Athletic thighs. A smooth, succulent, petite plum. But it was her heart that really turned him on.

The first mediRep arrived. A young woman. Green jumpsuit. Long, blond, plaited ponytail. She was joined by a middle-aged man. Wizened. Dark-grey hair. Gruff looking.

'Where does it hurt?' asked the male.

'My back and feet are killing me.'

'Great. Can you move your toes?'

'AAAAAAGGGHH, yes, it ... hurts ... a lot.'

'Okay. I know it doesn't feel that way, but it's a good sign. What about your hands?'

'Yes.'

'Is there anything you can't feel?'

'I don't know ... no, I think I can feel everything.'

Skilfully, they slid Ariran onto a stretcher, securing him tightly with several orange straps. He was lifted in one slow movement, allowing the wheels to fold out beneath him. They rolled him slowly to the back of the waiting mediBus and loaded him in. The woman accompanied him. The male drove. Ariran felt every raised grid. Every loose stone. Every pothole. Each jerk and bounce of the wheels sent intense pain through his feet and up his spine.

'Let's see if we can sort some pain relief out for you', said the female mediTech. 'Are you on any medication?'

'I've taken an overdose.'

'Oh. What did you take?'

'ApaPi root, deMetaMal™, some histaBlox™.'

'How many deMetaMal™?'

'About thirty, I ran out.'

'How many histaBlox™?'

'About ten, fifteen maybe, I didn't really count.'

'And this apayi stuff, what's that?'

'ApaPi root ... it's supposed to shut down my nervous system, but, well ... it doesn't look like that's going to happen.'

'Ah. In that case, I'm afraid we can't give you any more medication. That cocktail is probably stopping a lot of the pain already.'

'I don't think so ... I'm in agony.'

At the hospiTech, Ariran was wheeled to a cubical and left staring at a ceiling light, contemplating what he'd done. They took blood. Wheeled him off for x-rays. Wheeled him back. Still no painkiller due to his overdose.

Tenebray arrived. She stood at the end of the bed. Long, dyed-purple hair strewn over her shoulders. 'Bro, why did you jump?'

'I wanted ... I want ... to die.'

Tenebray left the cubicle to compose herself. She didn't want Ariran to see the tears. She returned. 'We can't get hold of Mother, she must be at serviToil', she said, matter-of-fact.

Ariran didn't care. The pain had worsened. No point trying to fight it. He was going to have to feel it. Instead of struggling, he focused his attention on it. First, the heels and ankles. There was detail in the pain. Patterns where it was white-hot. Areas where it diminished. A needle-like pain in the nerves. Throbbing in veins. A sharp sting from torn ligaments. Broken bones with burning, electric edges. Next, he moved to his spine. This was a different sort of pain. It had electric edges similar to the pain in his feet, but there was a hollowness. Some space. Provided he didn't move, it was much less intense, but the slightest movement would give him an excruciating shock. Ariran let the pain wash through him, actively welcoming and accepting it. By embracing it, he released suffering. A calm wave rippled through his body, from the top of his head to the tips of his toes.

Tenebray was standing in uncomfortable silence, keen to get away. Sensing Ariran relax, she took the opportunity to make a move. 'I'm going to find Mother. Will you be okay?'

'I'm not planning on going anywhere for now', Ariran replied, smiling.

On the way out, she took a peek under the blanket covering

his feet. Her face blanched. She reeled back. Hastily replaced the blanket. Flinched a pitiful smile his way. Scurried out of the cubicle to find Mother.

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3. Doughnut

The overdose was unsuccessful. Incredibly efficient kidneys, according to the mediTech. Ariran was mystified. He'd barely felt any effects from the toxins he'd taken. Just a short-lived numbness. Suicide wasn't so easy.

He was resident on the joints and bones ward. Still flat on his back. Under strict instructions to minimize movement. Displacing the fractures in his spine could vastly reduce his prospects of recovery. He didn't dare move anyway, the pain was too severe. A plastic bottle was provided as a toilet. It was almost impossible to position it between his legs, and push his penis inside, without sitting up. At the best angle he could manage, he could only fill it halfway before it overflowed. Much less than his bladder could hold. The bed soon stank of piss.

To shit, he needed the help of a paliTech. Foam wedges were used to support his spine. Then a potty was slid under his arse. Shitting was agonizing. Being bed bound, and eating mushy hospiTech food, caused severe constipation. Each push and strain sent shockwaves out from the fractures in his spine, leaving him trembling and shaking. He wondered if childbirth was as bad. If it was, why would anybody in their right mind subject themselves to such torture? And who knew what pain the baby experienced as its head and body were crushed, squashed, and squeezed out. Not that anybody cared. Babies can't speak.

To add to his pain and humiliation, Ariran was also told not to clean his backside. Reaching could cause the spine to twist. PaliTechs had to do it for him. Gladys was the only one who did it properly. She had a sharp eriNis accent and a wicked twinkle in her eye. He could feel her latex-gloved fingers wrapped tightly in soft paper as she cleaned antiseptic foam off his anus. A slow, circular caress. Sometimes, he had to

hold his breath and think about football. All the while, she chattered about nights out clubbing, her favourite bikinis, and her pet dog. Gladys had a favourite catchphrase, 'The agony and the ecstasy'. She liked to say it with a wink and a smile. He felt completely at ease with her. Unlike some paliTechs, she was perfectly comfortable with the messiness of bodies. Smells. Excretions. Blood. Mucus. Orifices.

They decided to operate. Bone grafts and metal pins. One of the mediTech's responsible visited Ariran's bed with a dozen students in tow. Without a word to Ariran, he lifted the blanket from the cage over his feet. 'The fractures in the spine aren't too bad,' he said, addressing the students exclusively, 'but his feet are a jigsaw, over twenty-six pieces. Look at that mess! He probably won't walk again, but we'll see what we can do.'

Some students looked at Ariran with pity. Others looked at his feet, feigning interest through their exhaustion. They shuffled away. A gaggle of whispering geese.

Never walk again? Nobody had told him. *What a way to break the news!* he thought. Soon he was in floods of tears. The cruel irony tore at his heart. His brave attempt to escape the enslavement of life had only resulted in a tightening of its grip. Life would be less bearable if he chose to live. He could no longer participate in many of the things he'd enjoyed. No dancing. No football. Even walking or standing might be impossible. And, should he decide not to live, it would limit his options for escape. No jumping from tall buildings or high cliffs. No running in front of trains, trucks, or buses. Sure, he could still overdose, but he hadn't got that right. It seemed his young body was more robust than he anticipated. Ariran looked at his arms. They still worked well. He could still use a blade.

Surgery commenced early. A needle and tube pierced the top of his hand. Blue anaesthetic was shot into the vein. Icy numbness crept up his arm. As the void engulfed his consciousness, a thought flashed through his mind—*how pleasant it would be to die like this. Fast. Painless.* The operation lasted seven hours. Two mediTechs worked on a

foot each. A slice of hip bone was taken for grafts. A dozen metal screws inserted to keep everything in place.

When Ariran woke, he was back on the ward. Morphine drip in arm. Everything felt dreamlike. He was thirsty as hell. A tube stuck out from a large, stitched, wound on his hip, draining a creamy-yellow fluid into a glass jar on the floor. One third full already. His feet were under the wire cage at the bottom of the bed, blanket draped over the top. Without bending his back, he lifted the blanket from his chest and peered underneath. Each foot was wrapped thickly with bandages. Originally white but now mostly red. The sheets underneath were red too. Blood dripped down the side of the bed, forming a puddle on the floor. Ariran tried to call out, but his voice was dry and feathery. Nobody came. He watched and waited, ready to catch the eye of a paliTech. None approached. The exhaustion and morphine caused him to pass out. He entered the dreamworld.

Ariran fiddled with a toggle on his duffle coat. It was shiny. Painted wood. Sunlight glinted off the top surface of the rail; the sides, powdery with brown rust. Rubbish and junk littered the embankment. An old tricycle. Empty lager tins. A piss-stained mattress. A place even adults shouldn't be. Excitement nipped at his innards. Two of the boys were laughing. The other was silent. Ariran too. A rat scurried along the stones at the edge of the track. It found the carcass of a bird and began to tear pieces off. One of the boys, Kuu Evans, found a football. He kicked it to Ariran. Ariran picked it up. Threw it in front of him. Booted it as hard as he could. Then they saw it. Terror gripped him, rooting him to the spot. He gasped.

He woke with a start. The grinning face of Kuu Evans haunted his mind. He remembered Kuu's words, 'Talkers die like porkers'. Ariran looked at his thumb. Still scarred. A secret pact. Two paliTechs were at the end of his bed, hurriedly mopping up blood. One was Gladys. She smiled, winked, and called him, 'a right little bleeder'. They wrapped more

bandages round his feet.

Two weeks after the operation, Ariran was sent to have a cast fitted to protect his spine. One lumbar vertebra had split, three others had hairline fractures. His latest x-ray showed they were healing well, but with plans to increase his mobility, they needed protection. His torso was wrapped with thick, dry cotton wool. A spiral of wet plaster bandages layered on top. It covered the area from his belly button to his neck. Two makeshift loops were added over the top of his shoulders to keep it in place. The plaster cooked as it cured, causing great discomfort. Next came the fun part. A whirring power tool to cut a hole in the front.

Cast in place, Ariran was permitted to sit up. A wheelchair was delivered to his bedside. A robust device with fold-up leg rests, to keep the weight off his feet. After a brief tutorial on steering and braking, he took himself for a run down the ward. The leg rests were like battering rams. Awkward to turn. His arms tired quickly. He noticed how withered and fragile his legs had become. Still, it felt good to be out of bed and able to move around. He could go outside for air, and use the shower. Faffing with plastic wrapping over his casts and bandages was time-consuming. He couldn't really wash properly, but he could clean his private parts. And it was a huge relief not to be subject to any more bed baths. Better still, he could use the disabled toilet. No more bed pans. No more fingers.

A psychTech visited. A kind, middle-aged man. Mousy hair. Thick beard. Fond of sandals and novelty socks. He spoke in slow staccato. 'I'm Morris Aylar, the psychTech who's been assigned to your case. Okay if I sit and talk with you for a few minutes?'

'I guess, I'm not going anywhere.'

'Good. Well. Ariran, how are you?'

'I've been better. What do I call you?'

'Morris is fine. Mr Aylar if you'd prefer. What's it like being in hospital?'

'It's okay.'

'Not very private though? How many beds are on this

ward?'

'Twenty. Only nineteen patients at the moment. Ted, an old guy over the way there, he died last night.'

'Oh, sorry to hear that.'

'Don't worry, I didn't know him. Probably for the best, he was really suffering. I didn't sleep much. The noise he made was awful. A dreadful wheezing and wet clattering.'

'The death rattle.'

'What?'

'They call it the death rattle. The noise someone makes before they die. It's because they're drowning in their own mucus. That must have been disturbing?'

'Yeah, but it's better than being at home. Mum snores and she gets up really early.'

'She must be loud.'

'Tenebray doesn't hear it, but I do, I'm in the top bunk, and she's in the bottom one.'

'Sorry? Who is Tenebray?'

'My sister, she has her own room.'

'And you have to share a bunk bed with ... your mother?'

'Yeah.'

'Why is that?'

'She couldn't cope with us fighting all the time.'

'So, why does Tenebray get a room, and you don't?'

'I'm younger.'

'When did this happen?'

'When I was twelve.'

'And you're eighteen now, right?'

'Yeah.'

'And you've never swapped places?'

'No.'

'So, how do you get space?'

'Space?'

'If you need time alone, where do you go?'

'The only place is outside. If I have to get space, I take Iggy for a walk.'

'Iggy?'

'Our dog. I'm usually the one who takes him out. I often

have a sly cigarette too.'

'Ah. I bet that Iggy is important to you?'

'Yeah. He's my best friend.'

'Sure. So, inside the house. You've no space to yourself?'

'No. Not really. She ... Mother, she serviToils a lot, so sometimes I have time alone in the bedroom, but I never really know when she might appear, and she leaves all her stuff lying about, I'm always having to tidy it up. I can't do it when she's there, she whines all the time.'

'Oh dear. What sort of stuff?'

'Clothes, underwear, hairbrushes, shoes, tampons, sometimes used tampons wrapped in toilet roll, that really annoys me.'

'I can imagine.'

'Then there's the mould under the window, she never cleans it, it's all black and horrid, I can't stand it. I try to clean it, but the cleaning stuff makes my skin itch. I come out in a rash.'

'Sounds awful. Thanks for telling me. I don't have much time today, but hopefully, we'll get chance to talk again in the future. Before I go, could you tell me what was going through your head before you tried to kill yourself?'

'Mr Aylar, Morris, this world, it isn't for me. It's all madness. I couldn't see any other way out. I wanted to die.'

'Are you sure?'

'Yes, I wanted to die so much it hurt.'

'Maybe you were just trying to escape from your ... situation? Could it have been a cry for help?'

'What? If I wanted help, I would have asked for it. You think I jumped from such a height, and took an overdose, as a cry for help?'

'Why did you land on your feet?'

'That's what hit the ground first.'

'No, I mean, if you had really wanted to kill yourself, you would have jumped head-first.'

'It wasn't really something I gave a lot of thought. I know a man who lives three streets away, well, used to live three streets away, he fell off a stepladder and died. I jumped from ten times the height. You know I'm crippled, right? Have you

come here to upset me?'

'No, not at all. Sorry, some questions can be challenging. It's just that maybe you felt so trapped, all you could do was say *fuck you* to the world.'

'Yeah, I don't find it so hard to say *fuck you.* But ... I'll keep in mind to jump head-first next time, thanks for the tip. What do you think's so great about life anyway?'

'My opinion isn't so relevant, but most people do find life okay. Some even enjoy it.'

'I guess I'm not most people then, thankfully.'

'You don't like people?'

Ariran shrugged. The man had only just introduced himself, why should he give him access to all his private thoughts?

Sensing Ariran's rising hostility, Mr Aylar called it a day. Before rising from his chair, he scratched a note on a small pad with a sharp pencil: *Initially talkative. Soon became aggressive and uncooperative. Possible personality disorder.* His sandals squeaked on the chequered lino floor. Ariran counted forty-six squeaks before they faded out of earshot.

Soon afterwards, there was a shout from across the ward, 'HEY, DOUGHNUT!' It was Derek. He had a badly broken leg. A decorating accident. He'd also hit his head and knocked himself unconscious. They'd kept him in to keep check. Derek nicknamed Ariran 'Doughnut' because of the ventilation hole in his plaster cast. 'WHO WAS THAT, DOUGHNUT? YOUR DAD?'

Ariran swallowed hard. Talking about Father was an awkward conversation at the best of times. He really didn't want to shout about him across the ward. Nor did he want to talk to Derek about his mental health. 'NO. A MEDITECH.' Ariran reached for a magazine and pretended to be busy. The ploy failed.

Derek came hobbling over. 'He didn't look like a mediTech, are you getting discharged, Doughnut?'

'Not yet. He ... er ... actually, he was a psychTech.'

'A shrink, Doughnut? What? Are you nuts or something? You don't seem nuts?'

'Oh ... and what does nuts look like?'

'You know.' Derek wobbled his head and rolled his eyes, finishing with a burbling noise made by humming and waggling his finger across his lips quickly. 'So why was there a shrink here, Doughnut?'

Ariran realized he wouldn't be able to avoid these conversations. He could make up stories but was an awful liar. Besides, he wasn't ashamed. Not for attempting suicide, only for failing.

'He was asking me about my suicide attempt.'

'Suicide? What, you did this to yourself?'

'Yep, I ... er ... cocked it up as you can see.'

'Why did you want to kill yourself, Doughnut, you've got your whole life in front of you?'

'Yeah, but what life?'

'Ah, come on, there's loads out there. Women, beer, fun. You know, fun?'

Ariran stared at Derek blankly. What could he say to that? He'd done beer. Sure, it was good, but it wasn't a reason for living, and as for women ...

'Come on Doughnut! We'll have some fun. Let's have a race.'

'A race? I'm in a wheelchair, and you're on crutches.'

'All the more fun, kiddo.'

Their first race was over quickly. There wasn't enough room in the ward for a man on crutches to scurry alongside a wheelchair, and the paliTechs were quite unhappy about the event.

Seven weeks from his admission, the hospiTech made plans for Ariran to be discharged. They wanted him home before the festival of winter lights. Had his tiny terraced house been suitable for a wheelchair, and if his mother been able to look after him, rather than serviToil in three separate roles, they would have had him out sooner. The first step was getting him on his feet. A physiTech brought some crutches. She said he'd healed really well. If he could get up and move around, they'd be able to send him home. It was assumed he wanted

this as much as they did.

A paliTech helped the physiTech lift Ariran out of his wheelchair and onto his feet. It was terrifying. His ankles were extremely painful. His feet felt like smashed bone china that had been hastily glued back together. Still, he managed to bear his own weight for a few moments. Some of the sensations were peculiar, like he'd been wired up to robot feet, and the wires were mismatched. Tingling seemed to come from the wrong places, and some parts were completely numb. It made balancing difficult.

The physiTech visited for a half hour session each of the following two days. Ariran grew more confident using crutches. Staff and patients gave encouragement. By the third day, he managed to get to the toilet and back entirely under his own steam. The physiTech was delighted. On the evening before the festival of winter lights, he was discharged.

When the taxi pulled up outside the house, Ariran felt a sharp sting in his spleen. He would be stuck in there. Just Mother for company. HospiTech was better. On the bright side, Tenebray had moved out. No more bunk bed with Mother. Unaware that a heated meeting with the psychTech had precipitated the change, he wondered if his family had finally gained a little empathy.

Sleeping in the same bunk bed as your mother wasn't information a growing boy wanted to share with anyone. He did once when he was twelve. It was a hot day, and he spontaneously invited a friend into the house for a cold drink and a game of cards. Tenebray was watching TV and didn't want to be disturbed, so they went upstairs. Mother had left an open pack of tampons, a hairbrush, and a bra on her bed. When the kid realized Ariran slept above her, he freaked out, called Ariran a weirdo, and left. Ariran never saw him again. His former friend was right, of course. It was strange. Ariran hated his life in that house with a passion, but he couldn't talk to anybody about it. Plus, he always had to be on guard to avoid letting it slip in conversation. But that was exhausting. Being a loner and staying silent took much less effort.

Now that he had his own room, it put a bookend on the

burden of shame. There was more sunlight and no mould under the window. Being able to shut the world out was liberating. Especially Mother. Ariran imagined how different life could have been, had things always been this way. He would have had a place where he could go and be alone with his books. A place not strewn with bras, make-up, and used menstrual pads.

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4. Trips

Weekly appointments were scheduled with Mr Aylar, the psychTech. His office was on the third floor of a converted mansion. Red bricks. High ceilings. Decorative ridge tiles and finials. A peaceful neighbourhood. Fortunately, it had been fitted with a lift; Ariran was still using crutches. The office overlooked several mature guRanzi trees. It had minimal furniture, but was pleasant and clean. A thick, hand-woven rug. Two plush, high-backed recliners. An antique, oak desk and matching set of lockable draws. The chairs were supremely comfortable.

'Welcome, Ariran. You may remember me, I visited you in the hospiTech. Sorry it was such a brief visit, we'll have more time now. Here, you can talk about anything. You can say what you like, I won't judge you. I would like for us to work together and figure out what drove you to attempt suicide. That way, we might be able to support you to live a more fulfilling life. It may take a while, and it might be difficult. Change can be subtle and happen gradually, so don't expect miracles.'

'I wouldn't expect anything. Sitting here talking won't change the world out there.'

'Maybe not, but perhaps it will help you explore ways of dealing with the world that are a bit less damaging to you. I noted from your records that you were admitted to hospiTech last year. LSD-induced psychosis?'

'Yeah. That was a bad trip.'

'Were you trying to escape the world then too?'

'No. Sort of. I was exploring ...'

Dropping acid enabled Ariran to experience familiar things in a wholly unfamiliar way. The ordinary became fantastic. New lexicons developed from shared experiences with friends;

language games that outsiders would never understand. Drinks, disco lights, tables, flooring, everything became fascinating. Shapes escaped their boundaries in luminescent fuzz. Patterns emerged. Faces popped out of brickwork and tree bark. Music was incredible; deep, spacious, and alive. Percussion popped, fizzed, and snapped. Guitars lunged, floated and dived. Vocals proclaimed and sauntered, weaving a thread that sizzled like a fuse. High-energy refrains exploded like rainbow volcanoes. Time split into gelatinous fragments. The gnawing angst of mundane existence dissolved. Why? What for? Why me? What now? All questions evaporated into the flow of phenomena.

A gifted surfer on the waves of consciousness, Ariran settled into a state of non-judgmental and non-reactive curiosity, acquiring knowledge that rendered language impotent. An understanding that only direct experience could truly inform. Mysticism was no longer a complete mystery. He was experienced. However, religious zealots and the feeble-minded were not. They didn't understand, and dismissed such transcendent knowledge as a disease of the mind, or delusions conjured by an evil glow. Any idea that threatened their ontology was cast aside with a sneer. Yet, they spoke freely of morality, love, and the greatGlow. Mysterious things they could never define or explain. Their ignorant hypocrisy repulsed Ariran.

His most memorable trip was unplanned. Illegal drugs weren't standardized and, despite being cautious, he could never be sure how much LSD he was taking. On this occasion, the dose was significantly stronger than he was accustomed to. Ariran, and his good friend Ruby, dropped the acid late one Sunday evening. It kicked in around forty minutes later. Colours got brighter, music became more tangible. Gradually, reality took on a playfully weird aura. All was as expected up to that point. Then a psychedelic surge began. The patterns on the wallpaper in Ruby's bedroom began twisting, merging, and bouncing in time to the music. Each deep beat produced sensations of flavour. Unusual tastes and discordant smells. His hands were coated with a strong aroma of smoked candy

floss and salted strawberries. Walls that were once distinctly flat planes began to merge into a gaseous pattern that he was immersed within. Three-dimensional autumnal mandalas began to sprawl out of the mist and lick his eyes. The whole building was falling, dissolving. These visions were not the semi-conscious slurrings of extreme drunkenness but vividly sharp and crystalline. Everything was within him, and he was in everything. One consciousness. All objects and beings that were usually fragmented and separate were now conjoined. Not like a network of things, each distinct and linked by some connecting force, but like an ocean of waves and ripples; things that could be pointed out, observed as individual phenomena, yet were mere temporal expressions of fleeting conditions within the ocean. It was terrifying and exhilarating.

The now-moment became so lucid that time began to slip. Ariran looked at the clock. Then he inspected his hands. Each wrinkle of skin. Each line on his nails. The way the fingers moved. How they dissolved into a pink fuzz when he shook them. After a considerable amount of time, he looked at the clock again. The hands hadn't moved at all. They moved backwards. He blinked. Two hours passed. He felt no fear, he was in bliss. There was no need for anything, not even time. Being was all. He jumped to his feet in rapturous glee. The hard wooden floor bent and wobbled like a trampoline canvas, each creaking noise whispering of cosmic beneficence.

'I get it now, it's all love. Everything is love. I love you. Give me a hug', said Ariran.

Ruby wasn't on the same wavelength and certainly not experiencing the bliss of an all-merging singular consciousness. 'Stop being weird', she replied, curtly.

'I'm not, I mean I am, but it's all love, everything is one love, give me a hug.'

'I don't want to have sex.'

'No, that's not what I meant, Ruby ... it's all love ...'

'I'm not in love with you.'

'We're all in love, we are in it ... in love ... no, that's all there is, we are love.'

'Stop talking, Ariran, you're freaking me out.'

'I don't want to have sex with you. I know you're gay. Why does love freak you out? Just feel it. Let it in. Can't you feel it? It's everywhere.'

'Sit down. I'm going for a walk.'

'A walk? Hey, I'll come too. We can walk in love. We can walk love. Love walks.'

'No, stay there. I need to be away from you right now.'

'Come on, Ruby, this is amazing—'

'SHUT UP! Stay there.'

Ariran sat down. The floor rippled outwards from the weight of his body and stuck to his legs like a spider's web. Ruby left the room. Ariran heard her wandering around in circles on the landing, mumbling to herself. Then she returned. 'Right, Ariran, you need to go home now.'

'Wha ... why ... I can't ... where—'

'Don't make me get mad, you need to go.'

'I don't want to make you mad man, madman, madwooombbman, maaadwooombbbbmaaan, mad-mam, madam, he-he-he, but look, it's cool, I don't want to touch you, I mean I do, just for a hug, it's all love, Ruby, look at the ripples in the floor dudette, we're in a three-dimensional cosmic spider web.'

'I'm getting mad now, I AM MAD. I am mad. Not mad. ANGRY. YOU NEED TO GO NOW. GO.'

Ariran couldn't understand. He gave up trying to explain. After descending the stairs to the front door, he meandered slowly to the end of the drive. Each footstep crunched the gravel like thunder. In response, clouds began to form overhead. He tried to walk very slowly and quietly, resorting to baby steps. When he finally got to the end of the drive, he looked back. Ruby stood in the doorway shaking her head, ready to close the door.

He pleaded with her one last time, 'Don't leave me here ... don't leave me alone. I'll be swallowed by the storm.'

Ruby closed the door. The trip was quickly turning into a nightmare. After a few minutes, she opened the door again. Ariran was still standing at the end of the driveway, frozen in panic. She decided to walk him home. Neither of them

realized that it was now eight-thirty on Monday morning. Parents were walking their kids to skolOpticon. People were heading to serviToil. For Ariran, time ceased to function. He walked home through a disconnected series of frames. Sometimes, they appeared in the wrong order. He would step off a kerb to cross a road, only to find himself on the other side almost immediately. Then blackness. Then he would be in the middle of the road he'd supposedly just crossed. Then blackness. Then at the edge of the road, stepping off the kerb to cross it. He was experiencing the crossing of the road in non-chronological order. Ariran realized that all experience was like this. Made up of slices. Normally, they were pieced together in an order that resulted in the illusion of steady progression through time. But not that day, not for him. He was out of time.

Parents passed. Their faces looked flat and shiny. Big saucer-like eyes. Children without heads—just bodies with a vague smudge of translucent colour above the neck. As the pair of psychonauts passed, parents pulled their kids close. Ariran began to feel that he might be shifting permanently into a new time-slice series. It was then that he noticed a long, white estate car with heavily tinted windows. It passed at a crawl. Two shiny, flat faces stared out from the dark shadows of the car's interior. He knew instinctively it was the time-poliTech. They were out hunting absconders. Refugees from time's procession. Other cars passed at high speed, too fast to see what colour they were, or if there was anybody driving, but the car carrying the watchers moved at a snail's pace. They were monitoring him.

Birdsong slowed into short, rhythmic tones and clicks, with silent pauses in between. A depth of detail missed in ordinary time. He sensed an internal logic to the sounds; a richness of communication, usually undetectable. Even in this busy urban setting, nature was an orchestra performing a symphony of secrets. There was nothing random about any of it. DotenWings, finchGulls, blackRobins, and astralCrows. All singing different parts from the same score. Syncopated beats. Juxtaposed melodies. Modulated riffs. The avant-garde

were thieves of nature.

Ariran wondered if the time-poliTech could detect his newfound ability. He worried they might confront him, but they seemed restrained, keen to stay within the confines of their vehicle. After a while, they turned off down a side road. He breathed a sigh of relief.

Eventually, he found himself stood outside his house, unsure how long he'd been there. He pulled his keys out. The jangling was percussive, the brass caught the light of the morning sun. Great rhythmic beams of golden-yellow danced around his fingers. He held the keys up and shook them gently in awe and amazement. Ruby pleaded with him to hurry and get inside, but she didn't try to help out; still too frightened to come within touching distance. It took Ariran a minute or two to get the key firmly in the lock, and a further thirty seconds to turn it and open the door. To Ruby, it seemed like hours.

He peered into the house with trepidation. The interior was dark. Blue. A foggy shadow. Reluctantly, he stepped inside. Fear rose from his feet, slowly creeping up his legs. The magic drained out, dribbling into the shadowy depths of earth under the building. He turned to look out from the doorway. Ruby instructed him not to follow her. She pointed her index finger, angrily punctuating her demand. Then she turned on her heels and ran off down the street. She was gone, but only for a moment. Suddenly, she was back, still running, still forty yards from the end of the road. Then gone again. Then back in the road, about twenty yards away. Then gone again. Time-slices. Ariran stood motionless, staring into the distance, waiting for Ruby to reappear once more. He stood there for days. Then he saw the time-poliTech drive past the end of the road, so he ducked back into the house and closed the door.

With the click of the latch, the last remnants of universal consciousness disappeared. The blue fog engulfed him. Now he was a tiny, separate fragment of consciousness, isolated from everything. A voice called out from within. It told him to go upstairs. There was nobody there. He stood on the landing, desperately wishing to be back in that place of universal and

blissful love that Ruby's paranoia had shattered. The carpet seemed inviting. Ariran lay down, running his hands sensuously over the short pile. He began to feel an unknown dimension open up beneath his body, threatening to swallow him. Quickly, he stood up. He looked at his hands. They seemed waxy and unreal. He took off his trousers. Two strange waxy stalks protruded from his boxer shorts. He wondered what body he was in and went to check in the bathroom mirror. A shiny wax dummy looked back. It seemed to move when he did, but it wasn't him. *Fuck!* thought Ariran, *I've been trapped in a wax dummy. A prison!*

An idea struck so hard his legs gave way. He sat on the edge of the bath. None of this was real. He was real, but this world, the one he was trapped in, it wasn't. Not the sky, the house, the bathroom, or his body. At that moment, he knew that he had to free himself from the illusion. There was only one way to do it.

Descending the stairs was laborious. So unsteady was Ariran, he paused on the second, third, fifth, and eighth steps to recharge his courage before continuing. By the eleventh step, his knees were quaking. He clung to the bannister like it was the rail guard of a small sailing boat in a fierce storm. On the final step, the thirteenth, things changed. He began to glide down slowly in a diagonal line. All was calm and still. He moved without touching the step, floating an inch or so above it. Then he hovered into the kitchen and searched for a fish knife. It seemed like the right tool for the job, but this was a simple kutKish kitchen, there were no fish knives. Instead, he found a large, sharp carving knife. It was already laid down flat on the worktop. Clean. Shining. Who left it there? Fate no doubt. He picked it up. Prepared to make the first incision. Hesitated. The procedure was going to make a mess. Best do it in the bathroom.

Ariran floated back upstairs without bending his knees once. The storm had passed. Now he had a mission. A purpose. A goal. And a tool with which to carry it out. He arrived in the bathroom, looked in the mirror, and saw that he was levitating. The floating, wax mannequin that peered back

was sinister-looking. Its two bulbous, unblinking eyes, like glass paperweights. He wanted to peel off the waxy skin right away, starting with the legs. First, he'd make a deep incision around the circumference of his ankle. Then he'd peel upwards, like he was rolling up a stocking. He bent down, and was about to dig the blade in, when he felt a strong urge to slice deeply down the length of his arms instead. Confused, he sat on the edge of the bath again.

Peeling the skin from his fake, waxy body wasn't going to be easy. Where was the best place to start such a job? Nowhere seemed obviously practical. He pondered whether to kill the body instead of peeling it, but he was convinced that if he removed all the skin, a shining body of light would emerge and he'd be free. The black and white chequered pattern on the floor distracted him. Cheap vinyl tiles. A pink and orange striped bathmat. An aesthetic so jarring, he had to lie on the floor and look at the plain, white ceiling to contemplate his quandary.

Meditating on a sea of white caused Ariran's vision to change. It went inward. Inside his body. He was looking at wet, messy organs. Pink, fatty ripples. Blood and jelly. He shrank further and entered a nerve fibre. Began bouncing in electric flashes across membranes and synapses. He travelled from the heart to the intestine, back up the spine and into the skull. There, he became so small, all perspective was lost completely. Nothing was recognizable, just blobs of floating colour.

Soon he came face to face with a small yellow oval. It began to communicate with him, glowing brighter with each booming sound, 'WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE?'

'What?'

'NO, NOT WHAT. WHO? WHO?'

'I don't know, Ariran, no-one, but I want to be nobody, no body, not no-one, I want to be one, not a body. Do you see?'

'NO! We have been working on this project for millions of years, and you, YOU, will NOT put an end to it here, like this.'

'Oh, who, what are you?'

'That's not important.'

‘Are you the time-poliTech?’

‘What? No. You cannot understand what we are, what we are doing, nor where we are going, and you will NOT put an end to our project. Now love yourself.’

‘What?’

‘Love yourself.’

The yellow oval glowed intensely and began to expand until it engulfed Ariran. His vision was nothing but a bright burning light; immense, warm, homely. He wanted to stay there forever, but the light faded. Normal vision returned. He was back on the bathroom floor, arms clasped tightly around himself in a strong embrace. Tears flooded down his cheeks. He clambered to his feet, knocking the top of the knife with his hand, reminding him of his mission. But now there was a dilemma. On one hand, he had a compulsion to obey the glowing, yellow oval. On the other, a desire to take up the knife and begin to peel away his skin. Or slash at his neck and bleed to death. He wondered if this little yellow voice was really a demon. A conspirator of entrapment in the material realm, sent to prevent his escape.

Ariran paced up and down in his boxer shorts for an hour or more. Which of his thoughts and experiences could he really trust? The world seemed to be a trap; his body a waxy prison. But the voice in the glow had spoken with such feeling and authority. It wanted him to live in this body, to love himself enough to live, and to live in love. The knife could release him, but where would he end up? What if this voice was waiting for him? Would he be judged? He felt a slight panic and realized he was in danger of making an irreversible choice. A decision of grave cosmic importance. It needed more thought. He picked up the knife tentatively, holding it loosely in his hand, and descended the stairs. When he reached the thirteenth step, he stopped. The downstairs carpet had become a stagnant pond; a swirling tepid pool of dark green and blue with strips of red algae floating on top. A couple of bubbles popped on the surface. Carpet fish. He knew they weren't dangerous, but there could be something else down there. Tentatively, he dipped a toe in. Surprisingly, it felt solid.

Finding that he could walk on water, he continued to the kitchen. A carpet fish jumped out from under his toes. Ariran tried to grab it, but it plopped back into the water and was gone.

In the kitchen, he tried to put the knife back. Instead, he found the blade pointing toward his head. A wild-eyed, grinning face appeared in front of him. 'Talkers die like porkers'. It was Kuu Evans. By the greatGlow, how had Kuu got in? Quickly, Ariran grabbed the wrist of the arm that was holding the knife. Kuu's face evaporated. He found himself wrestling his left arm with his right. There was nobody else there. Such trickery. Who knew Kuu knew voodoo? Ariran managed to get a strong grip on the attacking arm, preventing it from moving. He tried to edge away from the blade, but it followed wherever he went.

Continuing to hold off the armed arm, he backed away from the kitchen and made his way to the telephone at the far side of the lounge. When he reached it, he wrestled the armed arm down and dug his thumbnail into the wrist. The knife dropped to the floor. Quickly, he called the poliTech while sucking at the blood oozing from the gouge wounds.

'I need help, I've taken something and I can't think straight.'

'Right ... okay, sir ... can you confirm your name and address?'

'Yes ...'

'Okay, sir. Take a deep breath. Now, I need you to confirm your name and address for me.'

'Yes ... Ariran ... I'm in my house.'

'And where is your house, Ariran?'

He peeked out through the nearby curtain. 'It's still here, in the middle of the street, but I think the time-poliTech might be coming.'

'Who?'

'The time-poliTech, they're different to you, secret.'

'Is this a hoax? Wasting poliTech time is a serious matter.'

'No ... I need help. Kuu Evans was here. He tried to stab me, but he's gone now.'

'Are you in imminent danger?'

'I can't tell. There's nobody here but me. This knife has a life of its own.'

'You have a knife?'

'It's on the floor.'

'Okay, what's your house number.'

'Thirty-three.'

'And what's the name of the road?'

'Love Street.'

'Really?'

'No. Guadelpo Street.'

'Gua—'

'No, Forest Road.'

'Forest Road? Are you sure?'

'Yes. But there are no trees. Wait, let me think. I'm sure it's called Forest Road, but there are no trees. I can see out of the window. Maybe it's the invisible forest. I don't think the street is invisible though, I can see it. Hopefully other people can too.'

'Okay, sir. Could you stop talking for a moment?' The operator matched a back trace on the call and was satisfied it was not a hoax. 'We have a mediBus on its way to you now. Could you tell me what you've taken?'

'Acid.'

'Acid? An acid trip? LSD?'

'Yes.'

'Okay. Please sit tight and wait for help to arrive. It won't be long.'

Ariran unlatched the front door, leaving it open a crack. He went back inside to the lounge, sat on the floor, and began humming a long persistent tone to prevent any more thoughts from arising.

A mediBus arrived twenty minutes later. No flashing lights. No fuss. The mediRep entered through the open door. Asked Ariran to stop humming. Told him to get up and walk to the mediBus. Ariran did as he was asked, but was quickly instructed to go and put some trousers on. After waiting a few minutes, the mediRep went back into the house. He found Ariran walking in circles, still in his boxer shorts. 'What are

you doing, sonny?'

'It's the carpet fish. I think they're safe, but you can't be too sure.'

'Oh hell! What are you talking about? Have you got any trousers handy?'

'Upstairs.'

'Okay. Stay there, I'm going upstairs to get your trousers.'

The mediRep found some joggers on the landing and took them to Ariran, grabbing a jacket on the way. The bewildered youth was marched to the back of the mediBus and handed his clothes. Once dressed, he was strapped into a chair to stop him moving around.

During the ride, Ariran became limp and began dribbling from the corner of his mouth. On arrival at the hospiTech, the mediRep wheeled him into a small room. He was transferred to a plastic chair in front of a small plastic table and given some water to drink from a plastic cup. Periodically, a mediTech or paliTech entered to check his vital signs and ask a few questions. His vitals were fine, but he was unresponsive to questioning. Ariran had wanted to answer, but found he'd lost control of his body. A response happened in his brain. He could hear his inner voice. But his mouth made no attempt to move. He was frightened. Did the mediRep drug him on the way? Maybe he wasn't in hospiTech and had been kidnapped by the time-poliTech? Then, the worst thought occurred to him. He might have lost the ability to end his life. Now, he was truly imprisoned in this body. He could be stuck in total isolation for another fifty or sixty years. That damned glowing oval, he'd been so close to escape. That thing had tricked him, and now he was trapped for good.

After several hours, a bright young mekaZien mediTech gave Ariran a pen and paper. He hypothesised that if Ariran couldn't talk, maybe he could write. It was a master stroke. Ariran mustered all his will and, with considerable effort, managed to scrawl his name, Mother, and the name of the hospital she worked at. This took more than ten minutes as he had to wrestle with the pen, which seemed to have a mind of its own, often jerking out of control and scribbling in

circles. At one point, it wandered off the paper, leaving a great jagged line across the tabletop. When he finished, Ariran looked down at his writing. It was all over the place. Some letters were huge, others tiny. The words were all at odd angles, bustling for space. It looked nothing like anything he'd ever written. Still, it was just about legible. The mediTech was very pleased with himself.

A further hour passed. Mother appeared. She tried to talk to him, but he was still unresponsive. Ariran was limp, pale, and shivering. He didn't feel cold. None of the medical staff recognized why. Severe shock. They attributed his condition to drug intoxication, despite his blood tests being clear. It was true that Ariran had tripped the light fantastic, but he'd also been to the depths of hell. He'd experienced the dissolution of time. Almost tried to peel the skin off his leg with a large carving knife. His suicide, only prevented by a conversation with a microscopic, glowing being in the depths of his own molecular structures. If this wasn't enough to cause shock, what was? Mother gave up trying to talk to him and left the room. Ariran heard her muffled voice in the corridor.

'No, he doesn't have learning difficulties. Please get the mediTech, that's not my son in there, there's something seriously wrong with him.'

Ten minutes later, the mediTech was back.

'He's not normal, what's wrong with him?' Mother asked.

'Well, physically, there's nothing wrong with him. Mentally, it's unclear. I'm sorry, but he can't stay here. You need to take him home.'

'But he's not right! Shouldn't he be transferred, or observed for a while at least?'

The mediTech became impatient. 'Look, he's physically sound. When this ... *experience* wears off, he'll be fine. Probably. You need to take him home and get some help with his drug habit.'

'Habit? He doesn't have a drug habit. Look at him! How will I get him home?' She picked up Ariran's arm and let go. It flopped back onto the table with a thud. A loud 'ouch' sounded in his head, but his lips failed to move.

'Well, I suggest you get a taxi, we can't spare another mediBus for ... for this!'

'But I've no money for a taxi.' Mother began to cry.

The mediTech walked out shaking his head.

Ariran was jolted by Mother's tears. His hand reached into his pocket. There was a ten maudaTech note in it. He'd no idea where it came from. He pulled it out and held it aloft. Mother stared in disbelief, took the money and shoved it in her purse. She picked up his untouched cup of water and necked it, then pulled him to his feet. They began a slow shuffle of shame, through the hospiTech corridors, and out across the car park to the taxi rank.

When they arrived home, Ariran was put to bed. Mother told him not to leave the bedroom. Time passed. A bell sounded. Footsteps. Mother appeared at the foot of his bed with a man in tow. An older man. Balding. Large round face. Large round head. She fetched a chair for the man to sit on and left the two of them alone. The man explained that he was a volunteer clariTech, experienced with substance abuse. He asked Ariran to listen to his voice and reply if possible. Soon, he established that Ariran was unable to respond. Mother brought the man a cup of tea, but nothing for Ariran. The man suggested that Ariran should be given a cold drink; it was likely he was dehydrated. A glass of cool, fresh orange juice was brought. The scene remained like this for some hours. The round-faced man smiling, talking, and encouraging Ariran to take a sip of his drink. Ariran awake but unresponsive. The sun set. Mother came and switched on the bedroom lamp.

Just as in the hospiTech, Ariran wanted to speak but couldn't. He also felt that he wanted to cry but couldn't do that either. Suddenly, he felt angry. Angry with his body. Angry that he'd listened to the yellow glow. Angry that he hadn't picked up the knife and sliced open his wrists and neck. Had he done so, he would now be in the grip of eternal peace and nothingness instead of trapped in a limp, waxy body, incapable of communication. With his rising anger came a burst of energy. A strong electric impulse flashed up his spine, causing his whole body to twitch. Then Ariran saw his arm

move and grasp the glass of juice. Slowly, it made its way to his mouth. He sipped it. The fresh acid sensation of the juice on his tongue awoke his senses. His throat was incredibly dry. It must have been twenty-four hours since he'd last drunk any fluid; even longer since he'd eaten. Sips turned to gulps and the glass was soon empty. He put it down and looked up, meeting the gaze of the round-faced man. The friendly, round face looked back. Weathered skin. Round spectacles. A thick grey moustache that bounced as he spoke.

'Better?' asked the man.

'Yes ... I ... who are you?'

'I'm a volunteer clariTech, affiliated with the church. Don't worry, I'm here to help you, not convert you. I've plenty of experience with people in your condition. I know what you're going through. Perhaps more than most of the medical staff you've seen. I've helped people in all sorts of situations. Even helped people kick heroin, although tobacco and coffee tend to be the hardest.'

'You look waxy, are you real?'

'Yes, I'm quite real. What your brain presents to you is an interpretation of the world. It might be quite different at the moment compared to what you're normally used to, but will probably wear off in time.'

'I can see your molecules, your pixels, I can see all of them.'

'Okay, that sounds interesting. How are you feeling?'

'I feel that all matter is an illusion. It looks real, but it's a projection, a pixelated, waxy projection like a simulation or hologram of some kind.'

'That sounds scary.'

'No ... I mean, I was scared, but I think I'm getting used to the idea. It's how everything is connected. It's all projected from the same place. We're all like characters in a dream.'

'Well, this isn't a dream.' The man shifted on his chair, his eyes darting around the room, checking for any dangerous objects. 'This, my friend, is quite real.'

'Yes, it's real. I know', agreed Ariran. 'It's a real dream. As real as a dream can be.' Universal consciousness was speaking to Ariran again. Not through a yellow glow. Now it spoke

through the figure of this man. It chose a form he could comprehend, so as not to frighten him. Deep down, he knew he was speaking with formless consciousness.

'Would you like some more orange juice?' the man asked.

'Yes please.'

The man beckoned Mother. She fetched another glass. Ariran drank the lot in one go. He felt his whole body tingle as the juice went down. An orange light flowed out from his stomach, along all his limbs, and up to his head.

'Are you the greatGlow?' he asked the man.

'No.' The man smiled knowingly.

'Hmmm. So ... not the name, you are the ... knower?' As he spoke, Ariran realized he was merely asking the same question using different words.

'No. I'm not the knower, but I do know some things.'

'Is orange juice the greatGlow?'

'What? No.' The man laughed. 'Ariran, orange juice is not the greatGlow.'

'Ah, is it something in the orange juice? Is it vitamin C?'

'Vitamin C is good for you, but it's not the greatGlow. Maybe this question is something for another time?'

'Oh ... er ... ah ... time ... I see ... are you with the time-poliTech?'

'The time-poliTech? No.' The man laughed again.

'Then, are you here to help me escape, are you a time refugee too?'

'No.'

Mother appeared, she was much relieved that he was speaking. Seeing the empty glass, she fetched a refill and placed it down at Ariran's side.

'Are you the greatGlow too?' he asked her.

'What?' She looked at the man with concern. 'Has he gone mad?'

'No. He's trying to make sense of his experience. You've nothing to worry about.'

'What was it you took, the drugs?' asked Mother.

'LSD.'

'Do you do this often?'

‘Sometimes, but not usually, mostly, I smoke cigarettes, and drink wine or beer.’

‘What other drugs have you done?’

Ordinarily, Ariran would have kept these things secret, but because he believed he was speaking with the greatGlow, and that Mother was just another bubble of consciousness in a great dream, he had no qualms about sharing. ‘Cannabis and poppers and speed and heroin ... just once ... but it didn't seem to work. I think it was fake.’

‘Heroin?’ Mother was shocked.

‘And ... coffee, well, I mean caffeine. Then there's sugar, alcohol, orange juice, vitamin C, oxygen—’

‘They're not drugs!’ Mother snapped.

‘Yes they are, it's all drugs ... they're all drugs. They affect the brain and the body. Give you energy or make you calm. Relieve cravings. Change your mind. Alter your experience. Try taking one away or adding one. Everything that flows in changes.’

The smiley man shifted uncomfortably in his chair. He was a true convert, a man of mystical experience. There was an essence of truth to what Ariran was saying. However, the man's knowledge of biology was poor, and he knew this wasn't a conversation Mother had capacity for. Cleverly, he redirected proceedings. ‘Yes, everything flows in, and everything that flows in also flows out. You've been there in that bed for a long time, do you need the toilet?’

Ariran realized he did need the toilet and took himself off to the bathroom. The clariTech told Mother that her son would be okay and was through the worst of it. He said he would be leaving and to call if she needed his help again. When Ariran returned to his bed, the man was gone. There was a leaflet on his pillow. It had a picture of a rainbow and a triangular cross on the front. They were supposed to symbolize peace and forgiveness, but Ariran knew that without war and conflict, peace was meaningless, and without evil deeds, there could be no forgiveness.

‘Wow. That's a lot to take in, Ariran’, said the psychTech. ‘We'll

need to try to unpack that a little. Do you still take drugs?'

'After that? You must be kidding.'

'Okay. I believe you. But you must stay off drugs and alcohol while our sessions are ongoing. Okay?'

'I don't have much opportunity, not with my legs the way they are. Just the odd cigarette out in the yard.'

'Cigarettes aren't a problem. Best if you can stop, but I don't count them as drugs. During your trip, you described an immense feeling of love. You wanted to celebrate it, but your friend, Ruby, she rejected your feelings?'

'Yeah, it felt brutal at the time. The joy was incredible. I'd never felt it on LSD before, it's not really a drug aimed at that, but it was like it had opened a door, so I could experience something that was real, something all around us that we're usually blocked from accessing. She reduced the cosmic experience to a desire for physical sex, like all I wanted to do was fuck her. It shattered everything.'

'She couldn't understand your love. And you had nobody to share it with.'

'Yeah.'

'Did that love extend to yourself?'

'It's hard to say. Before then, I'd always considered love to be a relationship, a way of interacting with another person, or myself, I guess, but this love was simply a way of being, an essence in all things. It was in me, of course, but it seems wrong to say I loved myself, just that I was love.'

'It sounds like a world without danger, without judgement, but your friend wasn't there with you, and without her sharing it, that world was destroyed. Why do you think that was?'

'Ruby's a good-looking young woman. She has men, and women, come on to her all the time. I suppose that sort of thing could change your outlook, the way you experience life and relationships. Perhaps Ruby just feels more like a body, and that sex between bodies is how love is expressed.'

'Do you think she had sexual desire for you, or you for her?'

'She's attractive alright, but she's a lesbian. Mind, if I'm being honest, if she'd wanted to fuck, at that moment, I would

have done. Not out of lust, but as a way of sharing the spiritual love I was feeling. It could've been ecstatic.'

'Do you still have the sense that everything is love? Is that door still open?'

'No. Occasionally, I get reminded of that feeling. A song, a painting, a poem, a sunset, anything can trigger it. But the world out there doesn't share the same vision, it's impossible to retain.'

'Love always abandons you?'

'In a way. It's more like I abandon it, in my mind, in my heart. Not consciously, it just slips away, this harsh solidity takes over.'

'I'm curious about this Kuu chap you spoke about. He's a real person is he?'

'Yes, he is. I don't really want to talk about him.'

'Yeah, he sounds frightening. In your hallucination, he wanted to stab you.'

'I'm not sure it was a hallucination. It felt so real when it happened.'

'Yes. I noticed your hands were shaking, and you turned quite pale when you were speaking about it. Did something happen with Kuu and a knife at some point?'

'Yeah.' Ariran looked down at his hands. He felt the scar on his thumb with his forefinger. 'I can't ...'

'It's okay. I think we're best ending things here today, there are just a few minutes left, but I do think we should pick this up again next time. Do you feel okay to go home?'

'I wish I had somewhere else to go. But, yeah, I'll be okay.'

5. Vase

'Hi Ariran. I'm glad you came back. How's your week been?'

'Okay.' Ariran looked around the psychTech's room. He noticed a painting on the wall. A colourful abstract. Wavy rainbow lines, like oil rippling on water.

'You like the painting?'

'Yes. It's colourful and strange. But, somehow, familiar.'

'I see. Does it remind you of anything?'

'I'm not sure. The sea. Radiation. I guess it's a bit trippy.'

'And you like that?'

'Yeah, I'd love to paint something like that. It has energy.'

'Last week, we were talking about something trippy that wasn't so pleasant. Do you remember?'

'Yes.'

'You'd mentioned some guy called Kuu. Could you talk more about him?'

'I'm not sure.'

'How did you meet Kuu?'

'He was always hanging around. I remember one time when I was sat on the couch at home, bored ...'

'Is Ariran coming out to play?'

'ARIRAN!' screamed Mother, despite knowing he was sat just feet away near the front door. She took any opportunity to raise her voice.

After pulling on his trainers, he jumped out into the street to join his friend. Like Ariran, Mattias lived in a terraced house with a small yard. His dad was in serviToil at the local chipboard factory. When he was on the day shift, he liked to spend his evenings in the pub. If he was not in serviToil, or in the pub, he'd be at his allotment, sitting on a garden chair, sipping cold tea. Mattias' mum was a housewife. Kind but always on edge. She was portly with skinny arms and cracked,

red hands. Her short, red hair flopped down in greasy spikes, pointing to the freckles and bruises on her face. Ariran had never seen her outside of her house.

The boys rarely made plans. Sometimes, they went swimming and shared a bag of chips afterwards, but not this day, they were both broke. Out of boredom, Mattias suggested visiting the old garages, a derelict collection of asbestos and concrete boxes. They were next to a railway embankment, adjacent to the allotment site. The front entrance was boarded shut, but Mattias had found a gap in the fence just large enough for small bodies to squeeze through.

After hurrying through the allotment site unseen, the boys stealthily slipped through the gap, skipped past a muddy area full of junk, and made their way into the midst of the garages. Most no longer had doors. Of the three that did, two were locked shut and one was slightly ajar. An up and over door. It was temptation too much. Mattias tried to lift it open. Ariran joined him. They raised it so the gap was around two feet, at which point the rusted metal jammed and wouldn't budge any further. The boys ducked underneath and went inside.

Ariran could smell stale urine but noted that the garage was dry. There was an old ladder padlocked to the wall. To most people, this scene would be an immense disappointment, but to the two ten-year-old boys it was a rare treasure. A den. Their very own private space. They discussed the things they could do to make their den the best. Find some old chairs. Put up a dartboard. Fetch Mattias' dad's camping stove. Toast flumps. But the den was not as secret as they would have liked. The garage door creaked. Two hands appeared underneath it and attempted to yank it open. It didn't budge.

'FUCKIN' 'ELL!' a voice rattled hoarsely.

A face appeared. Ariran's heart leapt to his throat. He felt his insides tremble. It was Kuu Evans. He'd robbed Ariran's bike a couple of years earlier. Kuu's dad was in prison for murder. He killed a shopkeeper. Not during a robbery, but after an argument over being short-changed. It happened in

broad daylight. Kuu's dad said he was owed fifty-eight maudaCent, barely enough to buy a newspaper. The shopkeeper disagreed. After a heated exchange, Kuu's dad left. He returned with a kitchen knife and stabbed the shopkeeper repeatedly in the chest until he was dead. And then some more.

On the day Kuu stole his bike, Ariran was alone, aimlessly cycling through the alleyways near his home. He'd been in the sort of safe mental space that city-dwellers lose long before puberty. A young girl, Kuu's sister, was standing in the middle of the alley. Ariran was trying to cycle past carefully when two boys stepped out in ambush. They'd been hiding in the recessed gateways to backyards. Ariran had been oblivious to their presence.

Kuu lunged from the left holding a huge kitchen knife. Ariran skidded to a halt. Kuu stood directly in front of him, one leg either side of his front wheel. He gripped the handlebars with one hand and pointed the knife toward Ariran's face with the other. Kuu's older brother, Mark, stood off to one side, grinning. Ariran knew about Mark because he picked on Tenebray. Once, he stole Tenebray's skipping rope and used it to hang a neighbour's cat. Another time, he stuffed a lit firework down the back of her t-shirt, burning her badly; she'd refused to let him grope her.

'I'm gonna stick it in your eye. Give me the bike', demanded Kuu, thrusting the knife even closer to Ariran's face. Kuu didn't speak like a child, more like a demon. His brother was still grinning with approval. Ariran got off the bike slowly. As soon as his feet were clear of the pedals, he pushed the bike toward Kuu and ran home as fast as he could.

At first, Mother presumed he was making it up. Who would rob a seven-year-old at knifepoint? Even less believable that they'd stolen a cheap, single-speed bike with handlebar tassels.

She was usually sceptical whenever Ariran was upset. It was as though she thought there could never be a real reason for it. 'There's something wrong with you', she'd say dismissively. Then, 'Why are you crying like a girl?' She

couldn't handle his pain. Wanted to push it back inside him. Deep down where nobody could see it. She didn't only do that with emotions, she did it with things too. Stuffed them in the back of cupboards. Down the side of the couch. On top of wardrobes. You couldn't move for stuff in her little house. Mostly useless stuff, like rusty cans of fly spray, used lightbulbs, old greasy oven trays, half-melted hairbrushes, and shoes. So many shoes. Damp, mouldy shoes, infested with spores of sadness.

This time was different. Mother could see the evidence. The bike was missing. And Ariran wasn't merely upset, he was in terror. Words were tumbling out of his mouth randomly. Something about a knife, mugged, alley, Kuu, Mark. She knew of the Evans family and clocked the meaning of his word salad. After grabbing her house keys, she marched angrily to the scene of the crime, dragging Ariran behind her. The little girl was still in the alley, but the boys had gone.

Seeing the thunder on Mother's face, the girl confessed immediately, 'I know where your bike is.' She pointed a tiny, chubby finger at a side-alley that branched off from the one they were in.

Mother marched up the alley and found the bike discarded under a pile of bin bags. It was undamaged. Nothing more was said. No need to involve the poliTech.

Retrieving the bike so quickly was fortunate. Ariran had heard about another mother who'd knocked at the Evans' house to complain about Kuu bullying her little boy. That mother found herself being dragged through the house by her hair. Julie Evans, the eldest of the four siblings, was in a particularly bad mood that day. With one arm, she pulled the woman through the house, through the backyard, and into the back-alley. There, she tore a piece of scalp off with her bare hands, and used the woman's head as a football. Her mother, Mrs Evans, stood at the back gate watching and puffing on a cigarette. They both spat on the crumpled, sobbing woman before slamming the gate shut and returning to the house to shoot up. A neighbour called a mediBus. He'd heard the screams. Saw the assault from an upstairs window. But he

refused to speak to the poliTech. They couldn't bring charges without a witness.

'This sounds like a horrible family, Ariran. You must have been frightened when you were robbed.' Mr Aylar crossed his legs. His foot rocked gently up and down.

'Yes. I thought I was going to die. You see, I knew they didn't really want the bike. When I saw that knife, I could only imagine one outcome.'

'Maybe. But you got away okay didn't you?'

'Yes. I was a fast runner.'

'Before, you were telling me about the time at the garages. Kuu appeared and you were very frightened. I can see why. What happened next?'

Ariran and Mattias stood silently in the derelict garage, staring in disbelief as Kuu Evans ducked under the door and joined them inside.

'FUCKIN' 'ELL!' yelled Kuu again.

'Er ... hi ... Kuu', said Ariran in the most casual voice he could muster.

'THIS IS MY GARAGE, YOU FUCKIN' PRICKS HAVE BROKE IN, NOW YOU'RE GONNA PAY,' Kuu shouted, spraying a cloud of spittle from his mouth.

Ariran stifled a laugh. Probably nerves, but Kuu making aggressive territorial claims over a derelict rectangle that stank of urine seemed absurd. His amusement surprised Kuu who was used to causing fear, not laughter. Momentarily confused, he stared quizzically at Ariran before deciding to focus his attention on Mattias.

'Right ... for breaking in you've got to climb onto the roof', Kuu said, pointing a stubby, dirty index finger at Mattias.

'What for?' pleaded Mattias.

'Get on the roof', demanded Kuu.

Mattias wasn't one to argue. He'd learnt from his dad to accept his fate, deserved or not. The three boys exited the garage. Ariran stood next to Kuu, watching. Mattias tried to scramble up the jammed garage door to reach the roof. He

gripped part of the opening mechanism and, as his weight shifted, the door moved, trapping his fingers. He yelped with pain, rocked the door back and tugged his fingers clear.

Kuu laughed. Then barked, 'Get on the roof ... NOW!'

Mattias clambered back up the door, more careful where he was putting his hands this time. He got a grip on the corrugated steel roof and hauled himself up. He stood up, sporting a look of deep satisfaction. The moment was short-lived. The rusty roof creaked, then collapsed. Mattias disappeared down into the garage. Kuu cackled. Ariran ducked under the door and found his friend lying on top of a corrugated steel sheet. He was shaken, had a nasty scrape on the side of his face, but was otherwise okay.

Mattias did a lot of climbing and falling. He was pretty good at both. In fact, over the previous year, Ariran had seen Mattias topple off the roof of a shipping container, slip from a rope swing, roll down a railway embankment, spill from a speeding go-cart, tumble out of a shopping trolley, and plunge from the branches of a chunky oak tree. For all his falls, the kid had only ever suffered cuts and bruises. He did break his arm when his dad pushed him down the stairs, but that didn't really count as falling.

Ariran helped Mattias up from the garage floor and followed him as he staggered to the door. The pair ducked under it and made their way out into the open. A rough looking tabby cat had perched on a wall to watch.

Kuu was still cackling, he was having fun. 'Go over there and get that bag', he commanded Mattias, pointing at an old canvas sack in a dark corner of one of the doorless garages.

'B-but I got on the roof, like you said.'

'You fell. That was against the rules.'

'What rules, you didn't—'

'My rules. You fuckin' arguin'?'

Mattias fetched the sack. Kuu grabbed it and pulled out the first thing he could find—a broken crystal vase. He told Mattias to go into the doorless garage and stand at the back. Kuu positioned himself at the open end, facing Mattias.

'CATCH!' Kuu shouted, throwing the broken vase to

Mattias.

The poor kid almost tried to catch it out of reflex, but pulled his hands back quickly. The vase hit his thighs and gently tumbled to the floor. Kuu retrieved it and pushed Mattias against the back of the garage wall, leering at him.

'Chicken', sneered Kuu. 'Now you've got to catch it, four, no, six times before I let you both go.'

Ariran was understandably happier with this deal than Mattias. His friend was looking at him, searching for some indication that he could help stop Kuu. They both knew they could overpower the little runt if they worked together, but the repercussions of doing so were unthinkable. Kuu's siblings would never leave them alone, ever. Those kids weren't scared of adults, they weren't scared of the poliTech. The graffiti they'd daubed on the side of their own house made that clear —*RIP poliTech Smith G322.* The boys would need the protection of an army for life if they won a fight with Kuu. Ariran looked back at Matt, expressionless. He could show him no sympathy. That would be considered a sign of weakness. It could break whatever weird magic was stopping Kuu from including Ariran in his sadistic games. Mattias knew what this meant. Catch the broken vase six times. It would be the least amount of cumulative pain. There was no point pleading. No point involving Ariran.

Incredibly, Mattias caught the next two throws without injury. He instinctively cushioned the vase with a downward movement of his body, bending at the knees like he was catching a heavy medicine ball. It was skilful. Miraculous really. Kuu was unimpressed. He wanted blood. The next throw was faster and harder. The vase slashed Mattias' hand. A small but deep cut. Blood gushed out.

The fourth throw was the last. Mattias stretched out his arms to catch the vase. He was already shaking with pain and fear. A sharp edge skidded up his forearm, tearing it open, before the vase hit him square in the stomach. Kuu had thrown it with such force that a piece of glass stuck in Mattias' belly, just below the ribs. He fell backwards in terror. The remains of the vase fell to the floor and shattered. Gritty

crystals sparkled in the dim light, mingling with puddles of blood.

Kuu wasn't laughing now. His face was bright red. The veins in his neck were bulging. This was his high. 'You fuckin' PIECE OF SHIT!' he screamed through clenched teeth. Mattias was lying on the floor in a puddle of blood, crying his eyes out. Kuu spat at him, stared for a few seconds to save the scene to memory, then marched off to the opening in the fence and was gone.

'How awful, Ariran. I'm sorry you had to go through that', said Mr Aylar, shaking his head.

'It wasn't your fault. Why are you apologizing?'

'No, I mean, I'm sorry to hear you had that experience. It sounds traumatic. What happened to your friend Mattias?'

'He was okay. Had stitches in his arm and belly. His dad grounded him for six months. I lost contact then. I'm told he developed a wasting disorder and ended up in a wheelchair.'

'So, you were out exploring the world, having fun with your friend. Then, this kid, Kuu, robbed you at knifepoint, and forced you to watch your friend being tortured. Another example of that solid, brutal world stealing your experience of a playful, happy way of relating.'

'Kuu and his siblings. They were, are, all bad. Much more than that happened. I was spat at. Had sweets taken. Fireworks thrown at me. All that sort of thing. And ...' Ariran stopped himself. He'd almost talked. What they did to that poor kid. Doug Havishan. He couldn't tell Aylar. '... and ... I think the robbery was the worst. I remember how it shattered my world. The thing is, none of them wanted the bike. They wouldn't have been seen dead on it. It was worth next to nothing. They did it for fun. Just for the hell of it. Although I guess it was their genes. Driving them to act. Training them for later life. Like cats toying with half-mutilated baby mice. I'd always looked forward to going out to play before then. Afterwards, I was always on guard. If life at home hadn't been so bad, I wouldn't have gone out much at all.'

'You were unlucky to live in a neighbourhood with those

people.'

'Unlucky? People like that are everywhere. My friend Brian was hurt too. That was sickening. He—'

'Hold on, Ariran. We'll need to stop there. I'm afraid time's up. You know, you've been strong to survive all this.'

'Survive? I don't really know what that's worth. It's just what life is programmed to do, isn't it? All surviving does is expose me to more pain.'

'It's possible to make sense of all that. A fulfilling life can be achieved.'

'Sure. Whatever you say. I'll see you.'

'Bye, Ariran.'

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6. Promenade

Rain pelted the roof of the taxi. Fast, arrhythmic, metallic drumming. The sight of droplets bouncing off the road, reflecting the red traffic light, sent an electric quiver down Ariran's spine. His head tingled. It felt like his mind was clustering together, ready to exit his skull. Out of the window, he watched an old lady sink ankle-deep into a puddle. In shock, she dropped her umbrella, revealing a head wrapped in a plastic scarf. Her old, wrinkled hand reached down quickly. She flinched with pain as she grasped the upturned handle. Her other hand went to the middle of her back. Two deep breaths. She straightened up. A wince. Two more breaths. She limped off down the road. The lights turned green. The taxi pulled away.

Ariran wasn't keen on going back to the psychTech. For all his talk, he'd only filled his head with bad memories. He was having nightmares. But he enjoyed being in the room. It was spacious and warm. The rug and that odd painting. They felt so familiar now. If nothing else, he could just sit and look at them. And it got him out of the house.

'Come in, Ariran. Take a seat. What terrible weather.' The psychTech looked out of his window. 'You'd mentioned a friend called Brian. Did you want to tell me about him, or was there something else you'd prefer to talk about?'

'I'm not sure.'

'What about?'

'I'm not sure whether I want to talk at all. I've been having nightmares.'

'Ah. I know it's unpleasant, but that's often a good sign. Your mind is pulling things out. Having a bit of a sort out, so to speak.'

'Yeah. Sure. The thing is. I don't know if I want to carry on, to try to survive, you know. It's not like I'm depressed, it's just

so evil out there.'

'Evil?'

'Yeah. I mean, what happened to Brian was appalling ...'

Aged eleven, Ariran enrolled in stage three skolOpticon. He chose to attend an institution several miles from home, unlike his friends who stayed local. Ariran tried to keep in touch, but time erodes the best of intentions. After less than a year, Brian was the only friend he continued to meet.

Ariran called on Brian one Saturday morning in late spring. An especially warm day. The first day of the year that had been proper t-shirt weather. The two boys went cycling. First, they rode around the local estate. Bunny hopping off speed ramps. Pulling skids. Doing wheelies.

Next, they decided to go to the riverside. It had a long, wide promenade. To get there, they cycled along the centre of the main road, carelessly weaving in and out of the white lines. An angry snake-headed driver honked his horn. So angry, he forgot he was smoking. When he shouted, 'Knob-heads', the cigarette fell from his mouth and landed between his legs. The boys were still laughing when they reached their destination.

Full of energy, they cycled along the entire riverside and back again, by which time an ice cream van had parked up nearby. Feeling thirsty, they bought two cheap, frozen, sugar-water sticks and lay on a large stretch of grass to suck them. They slurped away while dead-heading daisies and flicking away wasps. It seemed like a perfect day. Once finished, they picked up their bikes and made ready for the journey home.

Suddenly, there was a loud voice behind them, 'Where do you think you're going?'

Ariran and Brian turned around and were confronted by two older, skinny lads. One, Jimmy, had been in youth club with Tenebray. He was short, with two beaver-like front teeth and pale blond hair, cut into the shape of a bowl. Jimmy's friend was very ordinary looking; tall with dark brown hair. Ariran had no interest in responding to their question, it was obvious they were looking for trouble. Brian made the mistake of engaging.

‘We're going home.’

‘Who asked you to speak?’ asked Jimmy.

‘You just—’

Brian was cut short by the fist that plunged into his nose. He started to cry. ‘Why did you do that?’ he pleaded, wiping blood from his face with the back of his hand.

The answer came in the form of a roundhouse kick to the back of the head. He fell face down, his right shoulder splatting into a pile of dogshit. Now he was really sobbing. Ariran knew there was no point asking why they did it. He knew why. It was the same reason Tenebray, and Grandfather One, teased him and called him ‘melonhead’ and ‘stench’. Because they enjoyed it. The deeper reason was a primal drive for power; a claim of hierarchical status. Such behaviour was common among most animals; ubiquitous among the kutKish. They engaged in never-ending petty power struggles. Belittling. Name-calling. Jumping queues. Starting fights. Bragging. Showing off possessions. Mostly, they didn't enjoy doing any of this but were incapable of stopping. However, Ariran knew there was a subgroup of kutKish unlike the rest. A breed utterly devoid of compassion. Tormentors.

For tormentors, cruelty was not solely an unintended consequence of failing to become aware of behavioural impulses caused by an innate drive for power and social standing. They did it for kicks. And there were lots of them. The activities they engaged in were frequently shrouded in ritual, tradition, or some other justifying subterfuge. Really, they were satisfying sadism. Not the consensual kind. Consent was a major turn-off to these monsters. As a result of their cunning, many of their practices had been normalized. Hunting. Usury. Insulting. Trickery. Stealing. Conning. Hitting. Smacking. Polluting. Poisoning. Burning. Enslaving. Deceiving. Exploiting. Stoning. Bombing. Hanging. Shooting. Manipulating. Stabbing. Mutilating. Indoctrinating. Torturing. Mocking. Raping. And many other things besides. Ariran couldn't expose his progeny to a world imbued with such banal cruelty. He vowed to never reproduce.

‘Aren't you Jimmy?’ asked Ariran, with a cold stare. ‘You

used to be in youth club with my sister, Tenebray.' A statement of fact but also a seed of doubt. Of recognition.

One thing Ariran noticed about cruel, lizard-brained tormentors, was that they preferred not being caught. Not facing consequences for their actions. However, he'd also found that if they believed someone was trying to manipulate them, trying to change the power dynamic, most would carry on regardless, or even double down, to assert their dominance. It was imperative they felt in control. So, Ariran conveyed the information, that he'd recognized Jimmy as an associate of his sister, with as little feeling as possible.

He could see the bully carefully examining his expression as he attempted to process the message. Like most people, Jimmy was searching for an emotion to respond to. Emotion was always more important than information when kutKish communicated with each other. In the absence of emotion, information could become more salient but was equally likely to be ignored altogether.

'I don't give a shit about your slag sister', Jimmy sneered. He kicked Brian in the stomach. 'Get up shit, or I'll kick you again.'

Brian dragged himself off the ground. Eyes filled with tears. Dogshit stuck to his shoulder. It was fairly fresh and looked to have come from a big dog fed on processed, wet food. Probably cheap brawn. Brian's world was changing. The safe, happy world he lived in had ended. He would never inhabit that place again. Nobody was coming to save him. There were adults out and about, but they ignored what was happening to the boys. No doubt, they would tell themselves it wasn't their business, or lie to themselves that the kids were just messing around.

'Give me your hand', Jimmy demanded, pulling a box of matches from his pocket.

'N ... no ... why ... oh, please, why?' whimpered Brian.

'Hold out your hand', said the tall boy. He punched Brian hard in the side of the head.

Brian held out his hand. His whole arm was trembling. Jimmy lit a match, held it up with one hand, and dropped the

box to the floor so he could grab Brian's wrist with the other. Brian pissed himself. The dark wet patch grew quickly around his crotch, spreading out and down one of his legs. It looked like an upturned tear. Jimmy stubbed the lit match into the upper side of Brian's hand and twisted it round. Brian screamed. Ariran felt sick. He should have gone ballistic and tried to protect his friend, but he just stood there watching. If a lit match came in his direction, he would fight back viciously. Eyes would be poked and gouged. Fingers snapped. Noses bitten. Had Brian fought for himself, Ariran might have joined in. But all he did was grovel and whimper. They were stuck in a sick nightmare. Brian, the passive recipient of the evil will of the greatGlow. Ariran, a passive observer.

Time ceased for Brian. He was in the eternal hellfire. Fear, pain, and suffering were all that existed. Trauma swam into his subconscious, piercing the gelatinous egg of his young mind. A shadow-self was conceived. The one that whispered to him decades later, telling him to hang a noose from the loft, put it around his neck, and kick the ladder away.

Ariran continued to examine Jimmy's eyes but could see no spark there. His habit of staring intently into people's eyes often landed him in trouble, but he couldn't help himself. It was an extra seeing, like he could see souls or the very mystery of being itself, but it didn't work from a casual glance. He wondered if Jimmy might become unsettled by his unwavering stare, but Jimmy seemed intrigued. Perhaps he could sense that Ariran was disinterested in his power games, or maybe he mistook the look for one of admiration.

'Because I know your slag sister, I'll leave you alone ... this time', threatened Jimmy, pointing a finger at Ariran and spitting on his feet.

The tall boy lit another match and stubbed it out on Brian's hand. Brian was on his knees, sobbing his heart out. Were they going to go through the whole box of matches? Another hot match landed.

'Plleeeaaaase ... noooOOOooo', squealed Brian. He was weeping so hard, his entire body convulsed. Mucus dribbled from his nose, across his lips, and off his chin. There was no

Brian left, just a quivering embodiment of misery and pain. Jimmy kicked him in the back. The thud echoed off a tall, brick wall nearby, and back across the river. Brian was badly winded and rolled on the floor, desperate to catch his breath. He didn't realize he was rolling in the dogshit. It made for a pitiful and pathetic sight. The two thugs watched, cackling in celebration of their wickedness. Then they sauntered off in the warm rays of the late afternoon sun, chatting casually. Neither of them looked back. The next time Ariran called on Brian, nobody came to the door. He didn't try calling again.

'Another dreadful experience. Another lost friend. Can you tell me what you're feeling right now, Ariran?'

'Nothing.'

'Take your time. Try to bring awareness to your body. Tell me anything that comes to mind.'

'My feet hurt. My back hurts.'

'From your injuries?'

'Yeah.'

'I understand. Is there anything else?'

'In my chest. It's just ... empty. Like there's nothing there. And my head hurts. My bones and muscles feel heavy. I feel tired.'

'You've had more than your fair share of these experiences. Each time you try to live happily, something seems to crash in and turn everything on its head. It must make you feel like giving up.'

'I wish I could. There's something inside of me that won't let go of seeking something worthwhile. That's what's truly tiring. If I could resign myself to living the tepid, two-dimensional lives that others do, I'd probably be okay.'

'It sounds like a treadmill you can't turn off. The only option would be to keep running, or jump off when you had nothing more to give.'

'Yeah.'

'Okay. We covered a lot today. Go home and rest. Look after yourself. I'll see you again at the usual time.'

7. Guadelpo

Ariran decided to climb the stairs to Mr Aylar's office rather than take the lift. He'd become proficient with crutches. The muscles in his upper body had doubled in size. For fun, he'd even started walking short distances using only his arms, balancing on the crutches, without his feet touching the ground. Still, three flights of stairs was two more than he'd done before. His lungs burned horribly when he reached the top.

'You came by the stairs?'

'Yeah ... they're nice and wide ... not too steep ... at home ... they're narrow, really steep ... I almost killed myself on them when I was little.'

'Really? You tried killing yourself before?'

'Not deliberately, I ... it was Mother ... she'd left me in the lounge, playing on a trike. A tiny thing. Said she went to the kitchen. Only turned her back for a moment. Next thing, she heard screaming upstairs. Somehow, I'd managed to carry the trike up the stairs, and pedal off the main landing, off a step, and onto a wide step at the top of the staircase. The trike had tipped forward, the front wheel twisted round. My legs folded under the pedals and were crushed. My head smashed against the end of the handlebar, a hollow tube of metal. It pierced my forehead to the bone. The bike had jammed between the step and the wall opposite, but was tipped slightly toward the main staircase. I was in immense pain but didn't dare try to move. Part of me expected to tip sideways and fall downstairs. It's this scar on my forehead, you see?'

'Yes. Almost exactly in the centre. And how old were you?'

'Two.'

'I see. And you don't remember this happening?'

'Not climbing the stairs with the trike, but I recall cycling off the landing. I was going too fast, trying to do a U-turn, but

there wasn't enough room. I remember tumbling off, that sickly terror in my belly, thinking I would fall sideways and down the whole staircase to my death. Being trapped was the worst thing. The metal handlebar was stuck in my head. Blood dripped into my eyes. My ankles felt like they'd snap. Mother came quickly, but it felt like an age. When she arrived, she started laughing, joking about how stupid I was for trying to cycle down the stairs.'

'Do you know if they found any damage at the hospiTech?'

'Damage?'

'To your skull. It would have been soft then.'

'I wasn't taken to hospiTech. Mum put a plaster on it.'

'Oh. Perhaps she should have taken you to hospiTech.'

'Maybe. If Uncle Tom had been there, he probably would have.'

'Uncle Tom? Your mother's brother?'

'Yes. Uncle Tom was alright. When I was younger, he used to take me out regularly, but then I got another head injury ...'

The cheeky glint in Uncle Tom's eye masked persistent sadness and unease. He frequently fought with the corner of his mouth. It often tried to turn downwards against his wishes, especially when he was speaking or smiling. The full extent of the battle was internal, only revealed by a barely perceptible tremble of the lip. Why his uncle carried such sadness was unclear to Ariran. Perhaps a lingering pain from the failure of his first marriage, or regret about his second choice of wife.

Uncle Tom was a skolOpticon thothTech, as was his current wife, Elizabeth. She was prickly, bossy, and extremely protective of her only child, Robert. Aunt Elizabeth made a sport out of hen-pecking. Anything would do. Common sins included: using the same knife in the butter and the jam, using the wrong ratio of cordial to water, getting wet in the rain, or any such trivial crime as a child is prone to commit. Ariran had never met Uncle Tom's first wife, the one Mother called 'the bread-sharer' in a disparaging but not overtly hostile tone, like there was something highly unsophisticated about

sharing food.

Unlike 'the bread-sharer', Mother was a willing convert to mahiThism—a political movement created by the eleLazi in response to a dissident movement. A growing minority of kutKish were becoming aware of the eleLazi system of control. They wanted change. The aim of mahiThism was to divide the kutKish against themselves. It was achieved easily by increasing inequality, and progressively fragmenting and simplifying the boundaries of popular debate. With near total dominance of popular media, mahiThists pushed a hegemonic narrative that aggrandized obscene wealth and demonized the poor.

Mother was awash with shame. She was a struggling single parent and, being mostly honest, worked two or three low-paid serviToil positions at a time, just to make ends meet. However, as a mahiThist convert, she blamed herself for being poor, and also for anything else that went wrong in life. Sadly, she was so lacking in self-awareness, that much of her anger and frustration was bestowed on her two children. Constant criticism. Irrational accusations. Sudden fits of rage. A trans-generational baton of violence. Ariran's elder sister, Tenebray, metabolized her fetid particles of subconscious fear and hate by bullying and tormenting her younger sibling.

Growing up with such emotional marionettes led Ariran to develop keen senses. Even in the dark, he was skilled at avoiding eggshells. However, there were so many, he couldn't help but step on at least one, most days. He often wished he wasn't so gifted, and would have preferred to remain unaware of other people's feelings, which were frequently unpleasant. Feelings typically gave rise to emotions—independent forces that possessed people. A swirling coven of daemonic behavioural mandates. Hunger, thirst, rage, anger, bitterness, resentment, fear, hatred, suspicion, jealousy, envy, and desire. Some said hunger and thirst weren't emotions, but he knew differently; many had committed the most despicable acts to satiate them.

Uncle Tom's sadness was one of the emotions Ariran sensed that others either didn't notice or chose to ignore. The

man's misery manifested as a sensation deep in Ariran's chest and belly. Every external detail contributed to the formation of a complex, seething flavour within. The position of the body. The pace and tone of speech. The restraint of a frown. A slight downturn of lips. The dance of the eyes. The betrayal of clenched teeth, veiled behind a tight smile. Such phenomena gave rise to sensations, like a strong magnetic force, reverberating with different frequencies and strengths. Sometimes small, tight, spiked, freezing cold or burning hot. Other times, nebulous, feathery, and warm. Ariran called these sensations 'heart-taste'. When he was heart-tasting, he would often stare at people with an intensity that caused them to become quite uncomfortable. Nobody wanted to be seen behind their mask.

Grandfather One noticed Ariran's acuity and nicknamed him 'hawk-eye'. He also wanted to keep Ariran in his place and often humiliated him with insults such as 'melonhead' and 'stench'. Melonhead meant a stupid person who believed they were smart. But Ariran's head was disproportionately larger than his body for much of his childhood, so the insult worked on two levels. Stench was a reference to his halitosis. A demeaning term his sister Tenebray liked to use. Grandfather One and Tenebray regularly teamed up to mock 'melonhead the stench'. As it turned out, Ariran's halitosis resulted from tooth decay that first developed when he was very young. He brushed thoroughly every day, but the toothTech always seemed to find new holes when he went looking with his drill. Ariran wondered why Grandfather One didn't try to help him instead of bullying him. When he got upset about it, Grandfather One told him he was too sensitive. The old man was not devoid of kindness, but he housed a bad glow. Maybe something to do with the war. Guadelpo the horse may have housed a bad glow too.

To get close to the gigantic beast, Uncle Tom bundled Ariran and his younger cousin, Robert, under a three-rail wooden fence. Its coating of crisp, white paint glowed fresh in the bright spring sunshine. Uncle Tom couldn't fit under, so he scrambled over the top, belly first. Normally, he was slow

and thoughtful in his actions, but this day he seemed a little jumpy. He hurried the two children toward the centre of the field where Guadelpo stood, surrounded by shimmering waves of grass and clover. Ariran stumbled as Uncle Tom's giant hand pushed against his back, propelling him forward, and forcing him into a running walk. The poor child moved with the kind of clumsy awkwardness adults find cute and amusing, yet that simply indicates a dangerous lack of physical coordination, likely to result in painful injury and upset.

On reaching the horse, Uncle Tom delved into the pocket of his blue cagoule and pulled out a large, shiny, red apple. Ariran was delighted when the apple was passed to him to give to Guadelpo. However, the giant horse was disturbed by their presence, and began to edge away nervously. Uncle Tom tried to pat him on the nose. Guadelpo shifted, and the man ended up stroking the air.

'Hello old boy', said Uncle Tom, with a wide smile. The corners of his mouth quivered a little. 'Give him the apple, Ariran. Here's a treat for you, old boy.'

Ariran examined the apple. It looked tasty and matched his tiny red wellies perfectly. He wanted to eat it. Such fruit was too good for an ordinary horse, but the sacrifice was befitting of this great, muscular king. He held the apple aloft, squinting in the bright sunlight. From his low vantage point, all he could see was a huge black silhouette with pointed, twitching ears. The horse rocked its head from side to side, its long neck writhing like a barracuda. A short whinny. Judgment. In one swift movement, the beast raised his head high, then snapped it back down. THUD! Ariran's skull cracked. He felt intense nausea. A trickle of blood dripped down his forehead and off the end of his nose. The sky, the sun, Guadelpo, and the green meadow, swirled and distorted into a grey mush. His little body crumpled to the ground. The apple tumbled out of his tiny fingers and rolled away.

Uncle Tom panicked. He picked up Ariran's limp body, threw it over his shoulder, grabbed Robert by the wrist, and ran back across the field towards his car. Robert was strapped

into the back, Ariran lain down next to him. Tyres screeched. The car rocketed toward the local hospiTech. Uncle Tom cursed every driver on the road and mumbled about blood stains on his upholstery.

On arrival, Ariran was rushed to intensive care. Uncle Tom paced up and down the hospiTech corridor for two hours, hoping that the boy would regain consciousness. It would make it easier to call Mother and tell her what happened. Ariran did wake briefly. He was flat on his back on a large metal trolley, being wheeled to x-ray. Amidst metallic clatters, he heard the low rumble of voices. Murky shadows hovered overhead. It felt like he was deep underwater. Then a strong force grasped his mind and pulled him back into the nothingness. A week passed before he regained consciousness. For much of that time, little Ariran was stuck in a strange nightmare. He had no body. His awareness was trapped in a pulsing of black and grey. It had the appearance of a decolourized, monochrome wood grain, or a low-resolution sonograph. There were strange noises too. Mostly, a deep, modulated growling. It started faint, gradually got louder, then faded away. While trapped in this nightmare, he had no idea of who or what he was. No concept of time. No memory of the outside world. An eternal horror.

On the seventh day, one of the many growling, gargling noises he could hear gradually crystallized into a man's voice.

'HeEeELlooOo, Arrriiiirrrraaannn, Waahyke Uup, Aaarrriiirrraaaann. HelloOo. Waahake up. Hello, Ariran. Wake up, Ariran.'

The words were repeated over and over. At first, they were spoken with that condescending, playful musicality adults often use to communicate with children. As time wore on, the passion of the speaker waned, and his words were recycled into a hypnotic mantra. Gradually, the undulating, grainy, grey world began to subside. Ariran tried to open his eyes, but they were glued shut. With considerable effort, he managed to part his eyelids a crack. Shapes began to emerge, but none had colours. He saw a man's face drifting in and out of focus. Sensation returned to his body; the familiar feeling of being a

solid and distinct entity, separate from its surroundings. A mediTech leant close to his face.

'Hello? Hello? Hello, Ariran, you're in hospiTech. You've been asleep for a long time.'

Colours faded back into place. Ariran felt a bandage on his head. It was tight. His head was very sore. The mediTech shone a torch into his eyes. Mumbled something. Took his pulse. Mumbled some more. Picked up a wooden board from the foot of the bed. Scribbled something on it. Placed it back with a clank. Smiled, and left the ward. After one more day under observation, Ariran was sent home to recuperate.

Home was a narrow, red-brick terraced house with bay windows and a grey slate roof. The front door was separated from the pavement outside by a large, grey stone step. No front garden. No front path. Many streets of these cramped living quarters had been constructed to house the lowliest kutKish who worked in a nearby port. Some still had an outside toilet, but most had been upgraded with indoor bathrooms; the tiny redundant outhouses used for storage, or knocked down to gain a little more yard space for shitting dogs and hanging out damp washing.

As a young child, Ariran enjoyed playing in the yard. Everything seems big when you're small. However, it wasn't without its dangers. Once, when the washing was on the line, he used a clean, white bedsheet as a goal net; the sort of thing only a young child would think was a good idea. Leaving muddy football prints on the billowing cotton was a joy, until discovered by Mother. He soon felt the sting of her hand across his bare legs. Huge, red, finger-shaped welts imprinted the lesson—having fun was dangerous and best avoided. Violence is a universal language.

The sheet he 'ruined' had to be washed again, but the tiny yard saw no more than two or three hours of direct sunlight, even on a clear summer's day. There wouldn't be enough time to get it washed and dried outside. The only other method of drying washing was to hang it on a maiden in the front room. This severely obstructed the main living space. Sometimes, the fire was lit to speed things up. It required constant

tinkering, turning damp parts toward the heat, and dry parts away. Drying washing indoors also caused it to absorb house smells, especially those of greasy cooking oil and boiled cabbage. The whole of that evening, Ariran was reminded of his sin as Mother perched on her armchair, straining to watch soap operas through a narrow gap between the sheet and the fire.

The TV dominated the living room. It was an old, wood-housed, radiation bowl. A gift from Grandfather One. Six buttons protruded an inch or more from the top right-hand side. Ariran and Tenebray took great pleasure in the solid clunking sound they made when they were pushed in. The first three produced a clear picture, the fourth a grainy one, and the other two, a monochrome salt-and-pepper dance caused by cosmic echoes of background radiation; a reminder that the universe was little more than chaos with the illusion of patterns.

Following his discharge from hospiTech, Ariran was kept at home for several weeks before returning to skolOpticon. The TV kept him company. He watched the salt-and-pepper dance for hours, searching for shapes and signals; some sign that something, somewhere, might help him understand the dreadful experience he had while comatose.

'A coma, Ariran? Quite an experience for a young boy. Did it take long to recover from your injury?'

'I'm not sure, Mr Aylar, I mean, Morris. I don't recall being told anything about them. Not at the time, or since. For such a big event, nobody ever seems to mention it. I remember coming out of the hospital with bandages on my head. They were really tight. Too tight if you ask me. But they didn't ask. There must have been some follow-up, but I don't recall going back to the hospital again.'

'Was your skull fractured?'

'It felt like it cracked, but I'm afraid I don't know. Like I said, nobody ever talks about it.'

Mr Aylar sighed. Sadness seeped into his face. He looked at Ariran for a few seconds, then he looked out of the window

and stroked his chin. ‘You've been through a lot, young man. Your description of being in a coma. It sounded terrifying. Can you remember any other details from that time?’

‘No. What I do recall is very vivid in my mind. The memory of being in that strange wood grain—’

‘The monochrome pattern?’

‘Yes. That's so vivid, yet it makes no sense to me. The worst part was the timelessness and not knowing what I was. There's no way to convey such an experience in words. Your painting, this one, the colourful ripples. It looks great from the outside. I like it a lot. But imagine being inside it. Imagine it was three-dimensional and you were stuck inside it. You couldn't talk to anyone. You didn't know who you were. You didn't even know it was a painting. Can you imagine that?’

‘Honestly Ariran? Not really. It sounds a bit like someone being blind drunk underwater but without drowning. I'm not sure. I was never much of a drinker myself.’

‘I had recurring nightmares for years. They were always the same. Just a repeat of being stuck in that situation, sometimes with distant voices. Often, when I woke from the dream, I couldn't open my eyes. Like someone had sewn my eyelids shut. I'd try to prise them open with my fingers but never could. Then I'd wake up again. This time with sleep paralysis. Unable to move my arms and legs. I couldn't tell if I was really awake, or had woken from one nightmare into another. I just had to breathe and wait. Eventually, my limbs began working and I got up. Every morning was filled with anxiety, every night with dread.’

‘It sounds terrifying.’

‘Yeah. But honestly. My life has been like a nightmare. I want to wake up from it. I wouldn't mind if it was all just a dream. Everything seems so alien.’

‘I see. You feel you don't belong. Like, this world, there's something wrong with it, or that you don't fit with it properly?’

‘Yes.’

‘I'd like you to talk more about this feeling of being alien next time we meet, it sounds important.’

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8. Fish Knife

Appointments with Mr Aylar became the highlight of Ariran's week. He spent the rest of his time at home, much of it trying to catch up on lessons he'd missed from his time out of skolOpticon. Trying to focus was difficult. In his mind, dry academia tumbled helplessly amidst metaphysical ideas, dreams, and memories. He filled time listening to old records, sketching, and taking short walks in the park on his crutches. Mostly, he was daydreaming. Doug Havishan was on his mind a lot. He was desperate to talk about that day. About what he'd done. Him and Kuu. Together. The nightmares. The flashbacks. It wasn't just the blood oath that stopped him. There was no honour in being loyal to Kuu. But there was honour in being loyal to himself. If he said anything, they'd investigate. Everyone would know. It's all they'd ever remember about him. But it was just one day. One moment.

'Hello again, Ariran.'

'Hi, Morris. I've been thinking about this alien thing. Feeling like I don't belong. I think I've always had that part of me. It doesn't seem to make sense though. I mean, I've never lived anywhere else, or been anything other than what I am, as far as I know. So, where does that feeling come from?'

'A good question. I'd speculate it was a biological drive for social bonding. An impulsion, almost like a pain, to stimulate pro-social behaviour.'

'Survival instinct. I see. But for me, it seems to have the opposite effect. I feel so ... different. It compels me to avoid people, at least people who appear to be overtly normal.'

'Sure. The drive is one thing, how it manifests for the individual is another. Perhaps part of you sees other people as a threat. You want to connect, but you fear that something important, or special, will be lost if you do. So you avoid bonding to protect it.'

'I'm not sure. I think I understand ... but what special thing?'

'Perhaps that will come to you in time. It's just an idea to think about, you don't have to accept it as the truth. Have you ever noticed what sort of things bring this feeling of difference to your awareness?'

'Hmm. A few things, I think. The obvious one is being poor. Or, maybe, not *being* poor, but being *aware* that I was poor. I really noticed that as a kid ...'

At the age of nine, Ariran made a new best friend, Jason. Like Ariran, he had white hair and attended the same meso-skolOpticon for entrainment. Ariran didn't hesitate to accept an offer to go to Jason's house one Friday. Jason's father picked the two of them up from skolOpticon in his luxury car. When they pulled up on the driveway, Jason's mother opened the front door and welcomed them with a warm smile. After carefully removing their shoes, the boys scurried upstairs to play laser wars. It was a large semi-detached house with an extension over the garage. Big garden at the rear. And Jason had his own bedroom. He lived like a king.

In his bedroom, Jason had a huge table full of figurines and model vehicles. Ariran could only dream of having such toys, but even if Mother had been able to afford them, he'd no space. Ariran didn't have a bedroom of his own, and his elder sister, Tenebray, didn't play nicely. Their cheap plastic figures and dolls didn't last long. They were crunched and punched. Stretched and bent. Stabbed and trampled. Occasionally, she decapitated carefully selected victims, placed their heads on a fork, and melted them in the fireplace. All the while, she'd make screaming noises and gurgling sounds, 'Pleeeaasse! NoooooOOOOooo! AAieeeieieeegggh!' As her play-torture reached its climax, Tenebray would cackle with glee. Her games were short, bloody, and brutal.

Jason was not like Tenebray. Neither was Ariran. Their plastic figure fights were choreographed and rehearsed. No figures were ever damaged. War often concluded with a truce and negotiation of terms of peace. Tense games, focused on

the battle between good and evil. An inner conflict to be resolved through humility, compromise, and self-restraint. For the fallen, death was swift and merciful; unlike the sadistic torments enjoyed by Tenebray.

Ariran heard a chime. 'What's that?' he asked Jason.

'Gong. Dinner time. Come on, mummy doesn't like to be kept waiting.'

They both hurried downstairs.

'Hello boys, what have you been up to?' asked Jason's father.

'We've been playing laser wars', replied Jason, enthusiastically.

'All going well, I hope?' quipped his father.

Ariran felt nervous. The scene was foreign to him. He usually ate his dinner off his knees. Mother's house had no dining room. Her battered, fold-out table was only dragged out on the festival of winter lights, or for breathDays—when family and close friends celebrated the day a person took their first breath. Ariran had never had a father waiting to engage in chirpy conversation over the dinner table. He did know a man called Father who he saw once or twice a week, but he was a different sort of being to Jason's father.

Sometimes, on a Wednesday, Father collected Ariran from skolOpticon. The young boy dawdled in the cloak room, fiddling with his coat buttons, so the other kids would be gone before he could be seen with his old man. Not that Father was ever on time. He was watchless. A small man. Clothes made from bin bags and sacking cloth. Shoes fashioned from desiccated roadkill and tarry bits of string. Most of his waking hours were spent pacing up and down, mumbling to himself. There was always a smoking stick hanging from his iodine-stained fingers. He carried a paper bag containing liquid painkiller. It was more important than anything. He'd be in a terrible state without it. All creases, swearing, and glaring. Had he consumed enough painkiller, he would greet his son with a kiss. Charred sandpaper dipped in acetone. Ariran could have lived without these kisses, but it was affection of a sort.

Father's flat was dark brown and mustard yellow with a strong odour of burnt cooking oil, boiled sprouts, and urine. Its most exciting features were a coal bunker, a rubbish chute, and a small, sad balcony, accessed through a narrow galley kitchen. From there, you could enjoy a vista of other sad balconies, all overlooking a square of wild grass, strewn with garbage and the odd burnt-out car. A skinny, wrinkled man called Uncle John lived in the flat too. Like Father, he slept in one of the two bedrooms. Auntie Margery, Uncle John's sister, slept in an armchair. She was old, enormous, and covered in straggly, grey hairs from head to toe. Ariran never saw her leave that chair, day or night. He guessed she must have moved about at some point because there was a walking frame nearby.

Auntie Margery liked to take snuff from a small metal box. She would snatch it up between her swollen pink fingers and thumb, jam it against her nostril, and suck it up noisily. Each time, some powder would drift down, landing on her pink nightdress. The thick brown stain that ran from the neckline to her midriff was testament to how much she loved the stuff.

While the old maid sniffed snuff, Tenebray and Ariran watched TV. Uncle John chose the channel—usually horse racing, cricket, or snooker. Sometimes, the boys were given a plate of baked beans, or a bacon sandwich. Other times, father fetched chips from the takeaway. Only chips, never fish. Jason's house was a world apart from Father's flat.

Ariran took his place at the table and watched Jason remove a napkin from an ornate, hand-carved, mahogany ring. He casually flapped the cloth over his lap and let it settle. After a short pause, Ariran mimicked his actions. Jason's father had bought several portions of fish and chips. They were unwrapped in the kitchen and placed into separate, pre-warmed serving dishes. Jason's mother donned a pair of oven gloves and carried the hot plates into the dining room. A large bowl for chips, a plate loaded with a stack of battered fish, and a small bowl containing mushy peas. Two serving spoons were laid out next to the chips and peas, and large flat tongs next to the dish with the fish. This was most unusual to

Ariran. He always ate chips out of the paper and had never seen them served in a bowl. It was so alien to him that he felt the urge to cry and run out of the room. However, he'd become adept at controlling his emotions due to the volatility of Mother. Instead of crying, he sat stoically and searched the room for something to focus his gaze on. There were plenty of interesting things to look at. He settled on an ornate fruit bowl, piled high with fresh oranges, bananas, apples, and grapes, and emptied his mind.

'You're welcome to have an orange for dessert if you'd like one', said Jason's father.

'Oh. Thank you', Ariran replied, realizing he was being observed intently.

Jason's mother walked clockwise around the table, laying a warm plate between each set of cutlery.

'Shall we recite The Gratitude?' suggested Jason's father.

Obediently, everyone bowed their heads and brought their hands together in front of them. Not with fingers pointing to the sky, but clasped and interwoven, making for an eight-peaked, bone mountain range. Ariran joined the ritual. As his gaze dropped to the table, he noticed a strange piece of cutlery. It looked like a small masonry trowel with a blunt, scimitar-like end. He kept his eyes slightly open throughout the prayer, so he could examine the features of the unusual implement.

Once the meal commenced, Ariran adopted the tactic of eating his chips slowly, one at a time. That way, he could watch and learn how posh folk ate. Their forks were upside-down. Jason's father picked up his trowel and used it to pierce the fish batter. He ran the flat blade along the underside of the fish while keeping it still with his fork. Next, he scooped a chunk of steaming, white flesh onto the wide surface of the trowel and loaded it onto the back of his fork. It looked effortless, like a cutlery ballet. Virtuoso skills. Ariran couldn't replicate them. He wanted to pick the fish up with his hands like he did at home. Wasn't that what the batter was for?

The family's conversation revved up, but their kindly voices now sounded sticky with privilege. Ariran was overwhelmed

by a dreadful feeling of inferiority. He masked his discomfort. Focused on his food. Matched his actions to Jason's. It was half the speed he'd normally eat. Even this was too fast. Jason was chastised by his father. Told to chew his food properly. Ariran blushed from the vicarious criticism. Once the heat in his cheeks subsided, he made his first lunge at the fish. To begin with, he made a clumsy hole in the batter and scraped some white flesh out. It crumbled into small pieces. He pushed some onto the trowel with his fork. Then, he turned his fork upside down and tried to load it with the flakes from his trowel. They slid off and back onto the plate.

'What are you going to do this weekend, Ariran?' asked Jason's mother with a smile. She'd sensed Ariran's discomfort and asked the question with the mistaken belief that it would help him feel more relaxed.

Ariran couldn't speak. His fish was a mess. Some had fallen off his fork, missed the plate, and showered onto the table. Nobody said anything. If Mother had been there, she would have told him what a clumsy idiot he was. The question echoed in his head. What was he going to do at the weekend? His delay in answering was creating embarrassment at the table. It should have been a straight-forward conversation, but he'd developed a habit of filtering everything he said for fear of being judged. Now he locked up completely.

At that time, most of his weekends involved joining Tenebray on a visit to Grandmother Two's pub. They met Father there. In the summer, Grandfather Two paid them fifty maudaCent each to help put out the beer garden furniture. It wasn't much of a garden, just a stone-slabbed patio adjacent to a car park. And, unlike an ordinary garden, there were no plants in it. Grandmother Two swept up broken glass and cigarette butts every day to keep it looking clean. Fortunately, it was on the south side of the pub, otherwise it would have seen very little sun—the building was three stories tall. Stone clad walls. Slate roof, steep with a slight curve. Each corner had a turret, decorated with ornate metal spires. A vampire would have felt quite at home there. The main entrance was a heavy revolving door. Glass, oak, and brass handles. The

interior was spacious. A large main bar that could seat fifty with ease. Off to one side, behind saloon-style, louvre doors, was a discrete lounge room. The living quarters were accessed via a grand staircase in the centre of the pub. It was blocked off with a hefty oak gate that sported a large, brass *staff only* sign. At the top of the stairs was a grand landing, lined with pillars and arches. From there, a multitude of doors led to a labyrinth of hallways and winding staircases.

Grandmother Two liked to boil tinned macaroni for lunch, using an industrial radiation machine. One of the first in the city. A fact she was very proud of. She was thin and perfectly erect. A five-foot exclamation mark. Wrinkled, anaemic skin. Jowls like fishnets. The old woman never stopped talking. If she ran out of things to say about the past, or things that might happen in the future, she gave a running commentary on every action she was performing in the present. A lot of talent for such a tiny woman. She could even balance a cigarette between her lips, fold a tea towel, smoke, cough, and talk, all at the same time. Despite a persistent look of total exhaustion, she never seemed to get tired. It was important to pay attention to Grandmother Two's words. If you let one or two fly by without catching them, you'd miss her wit. And if you missed her wit, you missed her essence.

When lunch was finished, Father took the boys out for a walk. First to the betting shop, then to a different pub. Kids weren't allowed in the betting shop and rarely in the pub. Gamblers and drinkers talked to them while they sat on the step outside. Usually, to ask them to move out of the way. Bones was a regular. Short and skinny. Two swallows tattooed on his hand; three more up the side of his neck. Trophies from his time at sea. When he wasn't on a boat, he lived in the pub. Or in prison. Bones taught the boys how to choke people unconscious, in case they ended up inside too.

Ariran felt too embarrassed to tell Jason's family anything about his weekend time with Father, but he did finally get around to answering the question about what he was doing at the weekend.

'Playing out.'

'Sorry?' queried Jason's mother.

'Playing out. At the weekend.'

'Ah, yes, good,' enthused Jason's father, picking up the loose thread of the long-dead conversation, 'and what will your mummy be doing this weekend?'

Ariran wasn't sure. He didn't have a mummy, but Mother would probably be working. She regularly worked overtime, cleaning the local hospiTech, and doing cash-in-hand hairstyling in their tiny house. Ariran wasn't used to talking when he was eating. He wished the questioning would cease. 'I think she's in serviToil.'

'Oh really ... and what does mummy do?' Jason's father persisted.

'She's ... a cleaner ... at the hospiTech.'

'Oh, excellent. And what about daddy? Will he be at home?'

'I don't have one!' Ariran snapped, staring at the mess on his plate. His bottom lip wobbled. Quickly, he took a deep breath, held it, and thought of nothing. This usually worked if he wanted to stop himself from crying. At home, Mother would say she'd dance on his bottom lip if he didn't put it away. If he cried, she demanded he stop, or she'd give him something to cry about. She was true to her word. Ariran became skilled at thinking of nothing.

As his mother cleared the plates away, Jason asked if he could take an orange upstairs for dessert. He was told to eat it at the table. Ariran declined. He'd no idea how posh folks ate fruit but soon regretted his decision. Peeling and eating an orange using your fingers was perfectly acceptable in Jason's house, provided that you did so at the table, wiped your fingers on a napkin, and laid the peel in a tidy pile on a plate.

The boys were soon back upstairs, enacting yet another battle between good and evil, but Ariran felt distant from Jason. He looked across the big bedroom and the vast array of expensive toys. He looked out of the window at the garden, reflecting on the civility and friendliness of the meal. Why did he live such a very different life? He wanted to swap places with Jason. Envy possessed him. Did Jason have any idea how privileged he was? Then he felt ashamed. Jason and his family

had been so kind. How could he resent them? But Ariran couldn't shake off the hollow, crushing feeling that was haunting him. He was a poor boy, living in a cramped home, with a dysfunctional family. That would never change.

'Not everyone uses fish knives you know, Ariran. I like to eat with my fingers too', said Mr Aylar.

'I know most people don't have those knives, but I didn't know that when I was a kid. I'm surprised you use your fingers though, Morris.'

'Sure. At home anyway. Still, I can see how comparing your friend's life to yours would've been so jarring. He seemed like a lucky chap. What was his name again?'

'Jason.'

'Are you still in touch?'

'No. They moved out of the city. He went to a private school. I never saw him again.'

'I see. And this experience, it made you reflect on your home life?'

'Yeah. Jason's house had so much space. My home was like a squashed box.'

'You said you'd felt a crushing feeling.'

'Yes. All the time.'

'Not just physically. Your mother seemed to crush you too?'

'Yes. It was like every interaction with her was an assault. Nitpicking, belittling, her presence was always a threat. Even when she was nice, it felt invasive.'

'In what way?'

'Oh, like she was manipulating me. She would say she loved me and then get me to brush her hair. If I said no, she would do this fake cry and say that nobody loved her.'

'So you gave in?'

'Yes. I often brushed her hair. I hated it. It was all greasy. She had dandruff. She asked me to scratch her head and get the dry skin off. It was disgusting.'

'And how old were you?'

'Young. I guess around five when she started doing that.

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After she moved me into the bunk bed with her, I stopped.'

'You were angry?'

'I wished she was dead. I wished someone loving would come and take me somewhere else.'

'But nobody came? And you had no way to get out?'

'Exactly. I guess that's when I started wishing I was dead.'

'Ah. And you were so young. It sounds like you didn't feel supported by your father either?'

'No. I stopped seeing him around the same time I stopped brushing Mother's hair. I wished he was dead too.'

'A lot of anger. Do you still feel angry?'

'Anger got me nowhere. It didn't get me out of there, it just made things worse. Now, I guess, I still feel a little mad at times, but more, just defeated.'

'Defeated? Do you think you'll always feel this way?'

'I'm not sure. But then, I'm not sure what the point of trying to change things is either.'

'Do you have dreams for the future?'

'Sometimes. I don't know if they're realistic. I just wish I knew what life was all about. It all seems so banal.'

'I can imagine. But it sounds like there's part of you that has hopes for the future?'

'I guess so. I'd like to study. Something I actually enjoy. Be an artist or musician.'

'It's not impossible you know.'

'No, I guess it's possible, but I don't really feel like it is. All I can think about is escaping home. I'll never be able to feel like myself while I'm there. But I need money. Being an artist isn't a good option. I think I'll have to sell my soul.'

'I see your quandary. A real conflict. You want to be yourself, but to be yourself, you can't be yourself.'

'Death would end that.'

'Yes. It would. But it would also permanently end the possibility of you being able to be yourself.'

'Yeah, but what's it worth? I wouldn't miss it.'

'I guess not, but aren't you curious? Maybe one day it would all make sense, on a personal level at least.'

9. UniTech

Following his suicide attempt, Ariran was absent from skolOpticon for four months. When he returned, he had three new problems to deal with: the practicality of navigating busy corridors and staircases on crutches; the stigma of being labelled mentally ill; and being behind in his entrainment. The head thothTech suggested he retake the year. Ariran balked at the idea. It would mean repeating countless tawdry lessons and trying to make new friends.

No longer able to play football during breaks, Ariran spent his time reading. Mostly poetry, philosophy, and books on art. Nothing from his curriculum. His suicide attempt had smashed the constraints of normal expectations. He had no desire to do what he was supposed to do, only what he enjoyed. Somehow, he felt more alive. More glowful. More himself. But his sense of alienation increased. Others seemed profoundly different, like they were dead inside.

Despite pressure from his family, and several thothTechs, Ariran killed the idea of a conventional career. Instead, he applied for a place at uniTech to study philosophy. For him, it wasn't an interest, it was an essential pursuit. He needed to explore the big questions. So many lives were lived on a whim, or in deterministic obedience to unconscious biological drives. It mystified him. And the kutKish justified their lack of inquisition with the most feeble excuses: 'No point in overthinking', 'What use is philosophy?' or 'You just have to get on with it, do something useful'.

Tenebray offered to drive him to his first interview. An unusual offer of kindness. Ariran gladly accepted. Really, she wanted to hook up with a student she'd been fucking, but she sold the visit as a rest stop to break up their five hundred-mile journey.

They dumped the car outside a block of flats. Hailed a cab.

Arrived at a grimy club. Cheap drinks. Sticky floor. The girl was waiting outside. She was surprised to see Ariran with Tenebray but was warm and cordial. A psychology student. Friendly, smart, and interesting. Tits and vagina. Not Tenebray's usual sort. Once inside, Ariran hobbled to the bar on his crutches and perched on a stool. He spent the night there, sipping bottled beer, and watching lonely students flail their bodies around in a smokey maelstrom of disillusionment. It was beautiful. Meanwhile, Tenebray and her lover shuffled and groped in the shade cast by a brutal square pillar.

The following morning, Ariran woke inside a crumpled sleeping bag on the floor of a large kitchen. Tenebray appeared, and the two of them hit the road. She'd broken up with the girl. Said they lived too far apart. Ariran wondered why she'd slept with her. Was that the price of their stop off? Maybe the girl scared her. She was smart. Had insight into the human condition. Could see the hidden strings shaping human behaviour. Like many confident and decisive people, Tenebray liked to be in control and had strong opinions about what was what. A partner who could see through the surface of her reality and peel back a few layers would probably be too challenging. Maybe she'd asked why Ariran had crutches.

For the rest of the journey, Tenebray drove like a getaway driver. They arrived in good time for the interview. Ariran's interlocutor was a thothTech who specialized in formal logic. He asked tough questions about things Ariran had no knowledge of. The fatigue of the long journey, combined with inexperience at interview, resulted in several questions being answered with a silent blush. Afterwards, the two siblings toured the campus. Lots of people. Several bars. Tall high-rise blocks for accommodation. Numerous patches of open concrete or grass. A student told them about a young female thothTech who'd jumped from the eighth floor the previous year. Her student lover had dumped her. Landed feet first. Spine snapped. Smashed through the skin below the back of her skull. Somehow, she didn't die, but was paralysed from the neck down. Still suicidal, the only method she had left was

to bite off her tongue in the hope she choked on it. That failed too.

Ariran attended a second interview a couple of months later. He'd progressed from crutches to a walking stick, and decided to travel by train. The interview started with a short written test designed to unveil potential rather than test existing knowledge. Next, a pleasant lady, wearing black and burgundy attire, called Ariran into her office for a chat. A more informal experience. The conversation flowed easily. He revealed much about his thoughts on life, the world, and the nature of his well-honed sensitivity about the mystery of being. It went well. He was offered a place.

'That's great news, Ariran. I'm pleased for you', beamed Mr Aylar.

'Yeah, thanks. I'm excited. How will it affect things here?'

'Your treatment?'

'Yeah.'

'Yes. It will interrupt things. It's a shame, we were making good headway. But it's important for you to get on with your life. Let me see, when do you leave?'

'Two months.'

'Okay. We had another ... twelve sessions to complete, and we have a summer break too, so the most we could fit in now is four. It won't be enough. We can't rush these things, and it's imperative you continue with your treatment. With your permission, I'll refer you to a unit local to your uniTech. How does that sound?'

'Will I have to start all over again?'

'Not exactly. I'll send a detailed summary of our work so far, but it will be someone new. It may take a while for you to build a working relationship with them. Unfortunately, you may have a long wait. When you were referred here, you were fresh out of hospital. Classed as a priority. Your referral there won't carry the same urgency.'

'Oh. Maybe I should stay? I mean, I could go to uniTech next year.'

'Are you having doubts about your course?'

'No. It's just—'

'Attachment. I know it's difficult, Ariran. I've enjoyed our time together. You're a likeable patient and very insightful. But you need to get on with your life, and to do so means we have to say goodbye.' Mr Aylar handed Ariran a tissue.

'Sorry, I don't normally cry, I don't know what's come over me.'

'No need to apologize. It's perfectly normal to feel sad. People with real courage let themselves feel the bad things too. You'll be okay. I hope it all works out and, for the best reasons, I hope not to see you again. Good luck.'

Ariran stuffed his bags into the luggage rack and found a seat nearby so he could guard his belongings. There was quite a stack. Bedding, clothes, books, and his guitar. A lot of stuff to carry with damaged bones. But he'd made it to the train station okay. He was able to walk without a stick now, but found stairs difficult, especially those without handrails. Walking any distance was painful, much worse the following day. When things were especially bad, he could only hobble. Some people took great amusement from his funny walk, it looked like he'd shit himself. Ariran was determined. He'd decided that if he was going to live, he'd commit to life with as much will as he had to suicide. And if that meant walking in pain, and being mocked by idiots for doing so, he'd do it.

On arrival, he swung a bag over each shoulder, picked up another in his left hand and two in his right. Then he wobbled out of the station to begin the trek to his new home. It didn't look far on the map, but he'd badly misjudged the journey. Just a few hundred yards from the station, he was exhausted. His ankles and spine burned. He lay down his bags, peeled off his heavy leather jacket, and pondered what to do. Exhaust fumes from the busy traffic mixed with the sweat on his brow and dripped into his eyes with a sting. He decided to try short relays, leaving the two heaviest bags on the floor, carrying the rest twenty paces or so, dropping them, and then returning for the heavy bags. Every completed relay, he'd count to thirty to make sure he got his breath back. He was vigilant in case

anybody tried to steal any of his stuff. Nothing had value, but he couldn't afford to replace it; the funds he was hoping would clear imminently only funded bare life, and they came with the shackles of debt. His paranoid glances and relay routine attracted some unwanted attention. Some people laughed. Some shook their heads. One motorist beeped his horn and shouted abuse, something about homeless scum.

A skinny, elderly man, on a bike, stopped to speak with Ariran. He was unsuitably dressed for cycling. Matching two-piece suit in brown plaid. Unbleached, collarless cottoCloth shirt. Polished, brown brogues. The bottoms of his trousers were tucked neatly into the top of thick, green woollen socks. It looked like he'd arrived via a time portal from a hundred years earlier. The bike looked even older. A truck passed, causing a hot draught. The old man's smell mixed with the acrid diesel fumes. Stale pipe tobacco, hair cream, and the sort of yeasty body odour that emanates exclusively from the neck folds of the elderly. Ariran glanced nervously over his shoulder, checking for any sign of the time-poliTech. It was a while since he'd worried about such things, but he had a gnawing suspicion that the old guy was a fellow fugitive. The two of them together would attract unwanted attention.

The man dismounted his bike, picked up Ariran's heaviest bag, and balanced it across the seat and top bar of his bicycle. Then he began walking. Ariran quickly gathered the rest of his stuff and followed.

'What's all this? Where are you heading?' asked the man.

'I'm a fresher, going to halls of residence', wheezed Ariran.

'Ah! Well! Not too far, but still a hell of a distance carrying that lot! And with a gammy leg too! What in the greatGlow's name have you got in all these bags anyway?'

'Clothes and stuff. Books and—'

'Books? What are you going to study?'

'Philosophy.'

'Aha! That explains all this. You've the weight of the world on your shoulders.' The man laughed heartily. 'Feels like a sack of lead. These possessions, they'll drag you down like all the extraneous ideas in those weighty books of yours. A

young man like you shouldn't be carrying all that around', he said, shaking his head theatrically. 'This is no good, no good at all. I'll call a cab.'

Before Ariran could object, the man whistled a taxi and bundled Ariran's bags inside.

'Have you got money?' asked the man.

'Yes, a little.'

'I see. Well, how much is it to the student's residence cabbie? Will a fiver do?'

The cabbie nodded.

'Have you got five maudaTech?' asked the man.

'Well, yes ... but—'

'It'll be the best five maudaTech you'll spend in a long time. Believe me.'

'Okay, I wanted to ask you. Are you, I know this might sound strange, but, are you a fugitive?'

'A fugitive?'

'Yes, like, er, a time fugitive.'

'Ha! That obvious eh! Of course I am, boy, why else would I be dressed like this! Shame the world moved on. Imagine this road filled with people joyfully riding bicycles instead of all this pollution, noise, and rage. Anyway, no time for talking, you'll get yourself caught.'

'Caught? By the time-poliTech? They're here?'

'What? No. By the storm. Goodbye young man.'

The taxi journey was only five minutes, but in that time the weather turned from sultry sunshine to raging rain. Ariran hobbled to reception as fast as he could. Once he'd been handed the key to his room, he dragged his belongings down two flights of stairs. The lower ground floor—a euphemism for basement. The room was compact, clean, and tidy. It had a small sink, a narrow, single bed, a wardrobe, and a long desk. The toilets, showers, and kitchen were separate; shared with eleven other students.

Ariran began to unpack. There was a knock at the door. A plump girl with a pretty face introduced herself, 'Hi there, I'm Janet. I live in number six. I saw you arrive. Wow, you're soaked.'

'Hi, er yeah, it's raining.'

'Naaah! So, what shall we call you? Number one?'

'Number one?'

'Your room number.'

'Oh. Sure. I'm Ariran, my friends call me ... er ... Ariran. My name's Ariran.'

'Oh, hi, Ariran, who is known as Ariran, how mysterious! You're from the north, right?'

'Yeah.'

'Oh great. I'm a northerner too. They're all southerners here. You can be my northern pal.'

'Oh ... er ... wow. So, we're both northerners ... amazing. Whereabouts are you from?'

'Even further north than you.'

Ariran struggled with the small talk but was taken aback by Janet's demeanour. Ebullient and friendly. Her brown eyes twizzled with excitement. Quite a contrast to Ariran. Despite claiming northern heritage, Janet enunciated full words without missed consonants or distorted vowels. Being northern seemed much more important to her identity than it was for Ariran. For him, being a northern, city-dwelling kutKish meant being even poorer than the other kutKish, and this invited many insulting tropes. Car thieves. ServiToil shirkers. Trouble causers. Bread-sharers. Scum. By contrast, Janet was from the countryside. She'd clearly enjoyed a comfortable existence. Not all country-dwellers were well-off, but even the poor among them had something invaluable—doorstep access to a vast amount of outdoor space. They could get away from other people with ease. Ariran had visited the area a few times. It was beautiful. He remembered going on a trip there as a young boy. A long walk to a waterfall. A yellow raincoat and blue rubber boots. The memory sent tingles up his neck and across his head.

Janet waited patiently for Ariran's mid-conversation reverie to conclude. She could see his mind was elsewhere, but it gave her the chance to take a good look at him. Handsome. And those eyes, there was something incredibly deep and mysterious about them. She hoped Ariran would invite her in,

but the prolonged silence became awkward. ‘Well, Ariran, I guess I'll leave you to settle in. It would be nice to have a drink sometime. We all went to the clubhouse last night. It got a bit heavy, so we're having a night off tonight. Sore heads and all that. Maybe later in the week?’

‘Sure, Jane, that sounds nice.’

‘Janet.’

‘Oh sorry, yeah, okay, Janet.’

She skipped off up the corridor. Her long, wavy, brown hair bouncing on her shoulders as she went. Ariran pushed the door shut. Cursed the greatGlow. Flopped onto his bed. He'd arrived on Sunday because the train fare was much cheaper than Saturday. It was a mistake. His shyness and social ineptitude meant that making friends wasn't going to be easy. Now he'd missed get-to-know-you drinks. That made him an outsider already.

He spent the next few days getting to know his room intimately. All those years of hiding his home life out of embarrassment had left him ill-equipped for life in student's halls. He'd no idea how to navigate the social conventions of a shared kitchen, fridge, sink, and shower room. There were so many new people. They all seemed very confident and financially secure. To avoid them, he survived on dry cereal, instant noodles, and cold beans straight from the tin.

At home, he could only use the kitchen if Mother was out, or he'd risk being shouted at, or even assaulted. She'd wave her thick, chapped hands in the air and wail, 'GET OUT, GET OUT!' Her kitchen was tiny and full of clutter. You could barely move, let alone cook. However, the woman was often out at mealtimes, so Ariran had plenty of cooking experience. He just didn't know how to be in a kitchen with other people, let alone face the politics of organizing cooking time, food budgets, washing up, and fridge space. Even visiting the bathroom filled him with anxiety. He took to pissing in the sink in his room and only shitting after midnight when all the cubicles were empty. It was Wednesday before anybody bothered to knock at his door again.

‘Hi, Ariran, who is Ariran! We're going to the clubhouse, do

you want to come?' asked Janet, with nauseating enthusiasm.

'Sure ... er ... I'll follow you up there.'

'Okay, don't be long', she said, with a cheeky wink. Her large breasts bounced gently in the cradle of a low-cut black top as she headed off toward the stairwell.

Ariran decided to grab a quick shower to freshen up, and masturbate to ease his nerves. It took much longer than anticipated. He arrived at the clubhouse ninety minutes later. Janet was sitting at a small table with four others. They were deep in conversation. Ariran went to the bar and ordered a beer. The barmaid pulled the pump. The beer tap sputtered out froth. She rolled her eyes, shrugged, and disappeared down a staircase in the floor. He heard clanking and swearing. Then silence. A cloud of cigarette smoke drifted out of the hole in the floor. Another round of clanking and swearing started up. Then, more silence.

When the barmaid returned, she pumped out half a pint of spume very slowly and threw it away before dispensing his beer. By now, he'd been stood at the bar for over twenty minutes. Desperate for some courage before meeting his new comrades, he necked his drink and ordered another. Glass in hand, he ambled nervously toward the group.

The table was only designed for four, so they were already very cosy. Ariran hovered awkwardly behind one of the lads. Janet saw him and introduced him to each person in turn. Ariran tried to store their names to memory, but seconds later, when he tried to recall them, they'd become clumps of mumbled fuzz. The conversation soon turned to origins: parents, education, location, and the like. Each had outstanding entrainment achievements. Two parents with interesting serviToil. Large homes in posh, leafy suburbs. Except Janet. She had a large home in posh, leafy countryside. Ariran didn't want to talk about his home. When his turn came to speak, he introduced a new topic—the meaning of life. A tall, wiry lad was the first to respond, 'Wow, random, Ariran! I ask about your folks, and you start quoting absurd, nihilist philosophy. Don't get too carried away, we all need some downtime.'

Ariran was puzzled. He'd not quoted anyone. He was talking about depressive positivism, not absurdist nihilism. It was his own brand of metaphysical ethics. Only by accepting the pointless, malignant foundation of existence could true compassion arise. From that would emerge the most joyful experience possible, which might still be quite miserable. He wanted to explain it in more detail, but the brusque remark had shut him down.

Sensing that Ariran was not going to breach the silence, one of the girls began to recite a poem, '*First our pleasures die, then our hopes, then our fears, and when they are dead, the debt is due, dust claims dust, we die too.* There. That's all the philosophy I need to know', she declared with a laugh, before theatrically taking up her glass and swilling down the remainder of her wine.

A beautiful poem, but its delivery wounded Ariran. He watched a drop of burgundy trickle from the corner of the girl's mouth. There was a simplicity and finality to her words. Until then, he'd considered the pursuit of philosophy to be no less than a matter of life or death. Yet, here it was. The conclusion revealed. There was no meaning to be found. Just pleasures and hopes, and they were mere transient illusions that gave way to nothing but fear. Common fate was to return to cosmic dust. Ariran didn't disagree. There was no need for three volumes of brow-furrowing, impenetrable prose to make the point. So what would be the purpose of spending years studying philosophy? He was young. Supposedly still in the pleasures phase of life. That was the true cause of his discomfort. He lacked the confidence or desire for hedonism. Even if that changed, he couldn't have afforded it. Save for the free pleasures. And, despite his desire, they were the ones that seemed most out of his grasp.

Another awkward silence fell over the table. It should have been comfortable terrain. Young, friendly people. Beer. Conversation. But Ariran couldn't relax. A deep sense of foreboding gripped his heart. His presence was making the group uncomfortable.

Janet broke the silence, 'Wow! Nice poem, Belinda. Hey, I

guess we're still in the pleasures phase though, right?' She held up her wine glass and winked at Ariran.

'Er ... yeah,' he blushed, 'cheers.' Then he necked the rest of his beer and went to order another, hoping he'd loosen up after one or two more. On his return, only two of the group remained. Janet and Belinda. They were talking quietly, making ready to leave.

'Well, that's it for us', said Belinda.

'Yeah,' agreed Janet, apologetically, 'we've got lectures early tomorrow. How about you, Ariran?'

'Er ... well ... yeah, I guess ... lectures, sure ... I'll have to check.'

The girls left in a flurry of scarves and coats. A fascinating collision of scents remained. Two expensive perfumes. One, dark, seductive, and lacy. The other, flamboyant and boisterous, with overtones of beach. Together, they smelled like a bar fight between a high-end hooker and a sea-faring aristocrat. Ariran downed his pint and hurried back to his room. Lectures. Yes. That's what he'd come for. He rummaged in his bag for the paperwork uniTech had sent with his welcome pack. It said his timetable would be posted in the faculty common room. It was to be checked first thing Monday. Two days ago.

10. Iggy

Ten o'clock, Thursday morning. Ariran rolled out of bed, determined to get serious about his studies. First, he needed to find the faculty building and take a copy of his timetable. He set off in the general direction of uniTech. The streets of the sprawling, grey metropolis seemed to shift and twist like the knotted intestines of some gargantuan beast. Lost, he asked for directions. His first request was met with a stony glare. Several more people dodged him, avoiding eye contact. Eventually, a group of youths pointed him in the right direction.

On campus, he ventured into a cafe to ask for more help.

'It's a cafe pal, not tourist information', sneered the waitress.

Outside, he found a man who, having checked his watch, decided he'd time to help. Middle-aged. Fuzzy brown hair. Wire-rimmed spectacles. Never had the 'misfortune' to need to visit the Philosophy faculty. He fumbled in a worn satchel and pulled out a dog-eared map. It was just two roads away.

Ariran found his timetable. He'd already missed two lectures. The third was imminent. Luckily, it was in a building nearby. When he arrived, he found several other students milling around outside. A girl with an eye patch sat on the steps to the entrance. He joined her, so he could rest his legs. Immediately, the girl stood up and walked to the opposite side of the steps. She leant against a black railing and eyed Ariran suspiciously. Two young men were nearby. One turned and smiled at him. Short with a tidy haircut. A crisp, white shirt underneath a slim, sleeveless, chequered jumper.

'Hi there, so you're a philosopher too?' he asked Ariran.

'Yeah, I guess so ... you?' replied Ariran, rising to his feet.

'Yes, are you here for the lecture?'

'Yeah, I'm Ariran.'

'Hi Ariran, I'm Will and this is my recent acquaintance, Charles.'

'Hi,' said Charles, 'we're both studying trickery, confusion, and stealing.'

'What?'

Will laughed. 'Politics, philosophy, and economics. Charles and I met earlier in the week. Have you been to the lectures? I don't recall seeing you around.'

'No. I ... had some trouble ... er ... this is my first.'

'Well, we're an odd couple, not in that way, but Charles here is quite right wing, and I'm what you might call a traditional left-winger.'

'Yes, Will is terribly misguided Ariran, how about you?'

'Well, I don't think of things that way. I favour self-sufficiency and liberty, but I think it's important that people are given help when they need it and not prevented from living a fulfilling life due to random circumstances they didn't choose. You know, like where they were born, who they were born to, what they were born with, or what bad luck they've encountered. I mean, we're all thrust into this dreadful world at the behest of feckless parents. None of choose it, do we? I guess anarchy would be the ideal solution, and I mean no rulers not no rules, a childish misunderstanding propagated by powerful interests, but it just can't work at scale, especially in a society with so many philosophically immature people in it. Still ... I guess it comes down to what the point of life really is. I mean, the basis for any political belief must be philosophical if it's grounded in reason, which most aren't, and that's where things get slippery.'

'Slippery indeed', agreed Will.

'Life is for living, is it not, Ariran?' asked Charles.

'Ah, you say *life is for living*, but that's a self-referential statement. Life is living, they're synonymous. If life wasn't living, it would be death, it wouldn't be life. So, you aren't really saying anything at all when you say that. You may as well say 'this is this' and have done with it. You see, life is often used as a noun, at least in our misguided language, but it isn't, it can't exist as a static entity, as an object with

boundaries, it's always in motion, it's a verb not a noun. Calling it abstract is lazy, it still doesn't make it a thing. Our language makes so many fundamental mistakes. People think it's just a way of talking, but it's so much more. It's an ontology; an active and dynamic way of perceiving. When we discuss things like life as though they're nouns, we miss their essence entirely. It isn't communicating at all, it's miscommunicating.'

'Very clever, Ariran', quipped Will. 'You see, Charles, you right-wingers just impose your will to power with your circular arguments. I say life, living, it's for giving.'

'Taking more like!' Charles retorted. 'But, back to life. Can't we say a person has had a good life after they die, isn't that okay as a noun? Their life is over after all.'

'That is what we say,' replied Ariran, 'but it would be better to say they had a good living. That's why forcing people to work for a living is so blatantly immoral.'

'Bollocks! How did you arrive at that?' asked Charles, angrily.

'I know it's challenging, Charles. But think of this scenario. I give you a box with a gift in, you didn't ask for it, you don't know what's in it.'

'Okay.'

'Now, I tell you that you can unwrap the box slowly, but only on condition that you train for work, or do work, to pay for what's in it.'

'Pay? Then it's not a gift.'

'Yeah. Bear with me. So, you must do a minimum amount of work every week, and you can slowly unravel the box.'

'When do I find out what's in it?'

'That's the interesting part. There might be nothing in it. There might be something of value. There might be something awful. It might look like something great, but then, as you unwrap more of it, something truly horrible and terrifying appears.'

'Horrible and terrifying? And you still want me to pay for it? This sounds like a terrible deal, I want out. You can have your gift back, Ariran.'

'Ah. But that's against the rules. You see, society has invented laws and ways of enforcing them. Everyone gets a gift. They must accept their gift, regardless of what it is, and they must do work to pay for it too. If you try to hand your gift back, you get locked up, brainwashed, and treated with medication. At least until the right people are convinced that you will acquiesce, keep the gift, and get on with finding some way to pay for it.'

'Ariran, this is utter madness', said Charles, shaking his head. 'Nothing like this would ever happen in a rational society.'

'And yet, it's precisely what happens with living.'

'What do you mean?'

'Living is given to, or, more accurately, imposed on people, without any consent at all. Yet, children are trained from a young age. Not just to be ready to work, but to believe that they must work to earn their living. To exist. But if any of them express the desire to give their *gift* back, perhaps because they're unhappy with the deal, they're treated as being defective, insane, in need of correction. They're referred for counselling or therapy which, from a different perspective, could be considered brainwashing. Often they will be given medication. Most commonly, both will be used. We're even at the point where people have been conditioned so fully and completely, they will declare *themselves* insane if they struggle to be happy under this system. They will even source their own brainwashing and pay for it too. If it fails, they're awash with shame and labelled dysfunctional. A thing to be pitied at best.'

'But, you're talking about suicide, aren't you?' asked Will in disbelief.

'Yes, but that word has been laced with negativity since forever. I prefer to think of it as nullifying a contract on grounds of duress and undue influence.'

'I'm not sure I'm comfortable with where this might lead, Ariran', said Charles. 'Could we change the subject?'

'Yeah,' agreed Will, 'this is heavy. I wonder when this damned lecture is going to start.'

'Okay. Let's move to something a little less imminent. But remember, any ontology, especially those accepted unconsciously, will lead to oppressive tyranny against those who don't accept it. This is why I oppose thinking of life as a noun. It objectifies it. Makes it into a thing which can be traded. When it's understood as an involuntary process, the immorality of being forced to pay for it, to pay *with* it, through coercion and without consent, that ... injustice becomes much clearer.

'When a person's life ends, it's because the metabolic actions have ceased. All we do, all the time, is metabolize. For each individual, that process starts at conception. An act they are neither involved in, nor one they can consent to. This metabolic chain reaction continues, grows, becomes physically distinct, but the unbroken kinetic connection exists until death. It's a process, not an object. Whether it be on a cellular level, whether it be food, oxygen, information, or space, we're constantly bringing in the outside and digesting it, processing it, and once that ends, living, or life as we call it, that ends too.'

'Hmmm. But, that kinetic process, it goes back generations?' Will asked. 'For example, the sex that leads to conception, that's a metabolism too. And there's a huge qualitative difference between things we do while living. Eating peanuts, that's pretty metabolic, but reading a book ... or dancing?'

'Yeah, I agree', replied Ariran. 'It's quite possible to consider all life as one long, uninterrupted, metabolic process. Maybe with a beginning and an end. Maybe not. Who knows? And we experience the various ways of metabolizing differently, for sure. Yet still, they're nothing more than different ways of ingesting and processing information.'

'Dancing?'

'Sure. What happens when you dance? You metabolize molecules, which are really just forms of information, and turn them into another form of information, energy, which is then sent outwards as novel information in the form of movement vectors in three-dimensional space. Plus time.

Everything is energy. Either stored or expressed. But energy can only be expressed in time. Well, there's the space-time thing, but—'

'Peanuts to vectors?'

'Why not? After all, peanuts are vectors, we look at them as scalar, but that's only due to the superimposed, arbitrary qualities we have invented to describe our perception, or match our experience. Like calories, size, or colour. When you get down to the charged forces that are moving in molecules, spinning electrons or waving fields as it were, then a peanut is a very complex set of energetic information in motion, just perhaps not from our usual perspective. Even then, we could see a calorie as a vector, as having a direction, it's just that the movement is very subtle. Any change in nutritional content could take months, years, or centuries, if not subject to digestion, but ultimately it would turn to dust. Nothing is completely stable or isolated, it's all in flux.'

'I don't agree', protested Will. 'A scalar can change magnitude without becoming a vector, can't it? If I leave a peanut on a window sill for a thousand years, it will eventually decay to a lower energy state, but it won't have moved.'

'Not really. Sure, we don't see it move, but the energy has gone somewhere, it has moved in space-time, it had a direction, or, more accurately, a multitude of directions. We just need to get granular enough and we'll see vectors. Everything is constantly squirming, morphing, shifting, and decaying. There is no peanut, just a community of vectors giving rise to the appearance of one.'

'But eventually,' said Charles, 'won't it all come to a halt. Entropy and all that. Everything will stop completely. Stone-cold dead and complete darkness.'

'God, I hope so', grinned Ariran. 'But there's no experimental evidence that anything could be so cold. Even theoretically, things at absolute zero will still have dynamic properties. That said, I'm not so sure our understanding of physics is anywhere close to reality, and the guy who came up with absolute zero was adamant that we'd never get aircraft to work. I should qualify, I really don't know much about

physics. Turning reality into an equation won't give us any answers about meaning. It can help us conceptualize. Speculate over metaphysics. But it's awash with nouns that contaminate its ontology. For example, there's no such thing as a static wave. Some might appear static, but they're constantly changing as energy shifts through them. I do wonder if the concept of nouns was deliberately created to deceive us.'

'Ariran, you're making my brain hurt', protested Will. 'It seems you wish to use some hotchpotch of pseudoscientific physics, and undemonstrable metaphysics, to deny the category of noun any legitimacy. I don't think you'll get far with that. What do you want people to say? I living is eating peanuting?'

'Sounds good to me', replied Ariran, with a wink.

'Oh my! I do wish they'd let us in for this lecture, it's so late already.'

The conversation with Will and Charles energized Ariran. He'd never been able to share such thoughts. Finally, he'd found people who were interested in similar things. While talking, he'd become aware of another boy sitting alone on the steps outside the building, not far away. He was dressed entirely in black and appeared to be talking to himself. Feeling sociable, Ariran tried to engage the boy in conversation, 'Hi there! Are you here for philosophy?'

'You talking to me?' the boy frowned.

'Yeah, I was asking are—'

'Fuck off!'

'I'm sorry?'

'Just FUCK OFF. Leave me alone.'

'Oh ... er ... sorry ... okay, I'll—'

'Idiot!'

Ariran turned back to Charles and Will. They both smiled and raised their eyebrows.

'I guess some people want to be left to themselves', said Will.

'Seems so', replied Ariran, blushing.

The lecture began half an hour late. Ariran was unsure if it

was solely because the thothTech was rushing, but he hardly understood anything. He hurried back to his digs so he could get some reading done. On the way, he bumped into Phil. A neighbour. An engineering student. A long-haired, death metal fanatic.

'Hey, wanna game of chess?' asked Phil.

'Er ... sure.'

'Okay, I'll fetch my board, back in a minute.' Phil scurried off down the corridor and returned with a small chessboard and bag of pieces. 'Here we go. Can I come in, Ariran?'

'Oh ... yeah, come on in. Are you any good?'

'Good?'

'At chess?'

'I'm okay. You?'

'I've had my moments, but it's a while since I played.'

'Smoke?'

'Yeah, sure.'

'This is good stuff!' exclaimed Phil. He pulled a small, leather wallet out of his pocket, opened it, and fished out some papers, tobacco, and a small brown block. 'The best Monrockin' hash I could find. I don't share this with just anyone you know.' Phil began to roll a joint, burning the edges of the brown block and crumbling it into the tobacco. It smelled sublime. Ariran postponed catching up on his studies.

Hanging out with Phil became Ariran's main activity. Several weeks passed. When he wasn't getting high and playing chess, he played guitar, slurped noodles, or read books and magazines. Occasionally, he ventured into the city, and wandered around art galleries and museums alone. His studies weren't going well, and he'd dreadful anxiety about money. The student debt-loan had arrived in his account, but there was nothing left once he'd paid for his accommodation. He'd gone overdrawn just to pay for noodles and beans. The lack of cash impaired his concentration and severely inhibited his social life. He turned down so many invitations, he stopped receiving any. Attending lectures seemed pointless too. They were dry and irrelevant. The drone of dead words from robotic professors irritated him to distraction. Any

theory or idea presented was founded on a baseless presumption or wilful assertion. Philosophers were doing little more than playing contrived games with language. When interrogated, their logic disintegrated into circular arguments, or utter nonsense. He walked out of one lecture, unable to tolerate the scraping and squeaking sound of chalk on the dry board.

Phil was the only person who noticed Ariran's mood darken. He'd become less talkative and his game was off. It was no fun playing against someone who couldn't care less if he won or lost.

'You won again', sighed Ariran.

'Yeah. Are you okay? You don't seem like yourself these days?'

'I'm not sure what my self is. I just feel tired a lot. And, well, things aren't as I'd hoped.'

'Your course?'

'Yeah. And life as a student. I feel like I've bitten into a shit-cake.'

'A shit-cake?'

'Yeah, you know. It looks great from the outside. Chocolate. Icing. Cream. But when you get into the substance of it, it's shit. No amount of superficial sweetness can atone for such a disgusting betrayal.'

'Uh huh. Well, maybe we should stop smoking for a bit.'

'Stop? It's the only thing keeping me going.'

'I'm not sure it's doing you any good. Hey, why don't you come to the festival of winter lights party? It's not far off. They still have tickets available.'

'I can't afford it, Phil.'

'Come on! You haven't been out for ages. Janet's worried about you. I think she likes you. It's only ten maudaTech. We're planning to have a few drinks in the kitchen before we go, to make it a cheap night.'

'Okay, I'll see if I can extend my overdraft.'

On the day of the party, Ariran necked a quarter bottle of vodka and a can of super-strength lager in his room. Once the booze took effect, he joined Janet and a few others in the

kitchen. They were sharing a large bottle of cheap liqueur.

'Hello stranger', said Janet, with a wink.

'Yeah, hi.'

'Wow! I'd forgotten you lived here', said Belinda. 'Come and sit down, tell us what you've been up to.'

'Ah, not a lot really.'

'Well, it's good to see you', enthused Janet. 'Phil said you're joining us tonight.'

'Yeah.'

'Great! We'll do some crazy dancing.' Janet winked at him again. 'Ha! Let's have some fun! You do dance, don't you, Ariran?'

'Sort of. I have bad feet, so, yeah, I'll give it a go.'

'Oh, so what's wrong with your feet?'

'Just an old injury, I don't like talking about it.'

'No. Okay. Here, have a swig of this.'

The club was dark, crowded, and loud. Ariran made an early trip to the toilet. There was a long queue. When he emerged, the group had moved on. After wandering around several floors, and checking numerous rooms, he gave up looking for them. His feet felt sore. Spotting an empty stool at one of the quieter bars, he plonked himself down and ordered a strong cider. He drank four more. By ten o'clock, he was out of cash. Time to go. He staggered out of the club alone. Despite throbbing ears, blurred vision, and persistent dizziness, he managed to find the underground and tumble over the barriers to reach the platform.

The carriage rocked and squealed. It was a relief to get off. He swayed dangerously on the escalator while ruminating over his failed night out. He'd envisioned a social evening. Chatting. Dancing. Maybe a snog, or better. Janet had been especially flirty on the walk to the venue, even squeezed his elbow. The night held so much promise. Yet here he was, barely holding himself upright, on his way home alone.

The handrail of the escalator was moving slightly faster than the stairs and began to pull him off balance. He felt woozy. A man stood directly in front of him, one step up. Steady and upright. Black, leather loafers. Pin-striped suit.

Ariran tried fixing his gaze on the back of the man's shoes. A sudden flush of saliva filled his mouth. He knew what this meant, but it was too late. Vomit poured out with incredible ferocity. It splatted onto the back of the man's legs, dribbling down his trousers. A few chunks wedged between the heel of his shoe and his sock. Ariran prepared for the man to turn around. He would be mad. He might attack. Maybe he'd call the poliTech. But he did nothing. Just stood there. Erect. Gliding upward. Not even a slight twist of the head to acknowledge the incident.

The next day, Ariran had a dreadful feeling of foreboding in his stomach. He presumed it was his hangover. Then Mother called on the shared payphone in the corridor.

'Ariran, how are you?'

'Er ... okay, Mother, and you?'

'Well, it's raining here, and I'm tired, I've been shopping.'

'Oh.'

'How's the weather there?'

'Not sure. I can't see out, there aren't any windows in the corridor.'

'Haven't you been out?'

'No.'

'Can't you see out from your room?'

'The curtains are closed.'

'Well ... look, I have to tell you something. This isn't easy.'

'Go on.'

'Iggy. I had to have Iggy put to sleep.'

'What?'

'You know he wasn't well.'

'He wasn't *that* sick.'

'Oh he was. Anyway, he got a lot worse after you left us. I took him to the theriTech. He said there was nothing he could do, you know, it would be for the best.'

'He's dead?'

'Yes', she said, sobbing theatrically.

'That theriTech?'

'What?'

'Did you take him to that horrible theriTech? The one that

made us wait in the car park while he tied Iggy's legs up and pulled his teeth out without using anaesthetic? The one we said we'd never take him to again?'

'Come on, son, it was cheap. We couldn't afford another theriTech, you know that.'

'For fu-when?'

'When what?'

'When did you have my dog killed?'

'Yesterday.'

'Couldn't you have called me first?'

'Well, I didn't know, it was spur of the moment, I had to make a decision.'

'Where is he?'

'He's dead.'

'No, his body, what did you do with him? Have you buried him?'

'No, I didn't know what to do. It was too expensive to have him cremated, and we've only a concrete yard. There's nowhere we could bury him. I left him at the theriTech for disposal.'

'Disposal?'

'I guess they put them in with the biological waste for burning.'

'Biological waste? Iggy? Is that all ... I mean, how am I supposed to say goodbye to him now?'

'I've got his collar, you could bury that in the park?'

Ariran hung up. He was devastated. Iggy had been unwell, but he wasn't dying. The little dog had an operation the previous year to clear out kidney stones that had trapped in his urethra. He'd had his cock split right up the middle. It was nasty but didn't seem likely to become fatal. The only person Iggy would let apply ointment to his wound was Ariran. He ensured Iggy recovered. Sure, his four-legged friend was getting old, but Ariran saw no sign that Iggy was at death's door before he left for uniTech.

The pain of the loss hurt like crazy. Iggy had been there since he was small. He knew he'd die at some point, but never imagined the extent of the distress it made him feel. Iggy had

been a part of him. Part that had been ripped out, leaving a hole. He thought of Doug Havishan. The look on his mother's face. It made him shudder.

After mourning for several days in his room, Janet knocked on the door. She wore nothing but a fluffy white bathrobe.

'I was just passing, had a shower, wanted to see how you were doing.'

'So so.'

'I hear your dog died?'

'Murdered more like.'

'It sounds like you need a friend.'

Ariran shrugged.

Janet pushed past him, sauntered into his room, and lay down on the bed. All cleavage and thighs. She patted the bed next to her. 'Come, sit, talk.' He sat next to her. She began to stroke his hair. 'Tell me about your dog. The good times.'

Ariran talked about Iggy. How he used to carry him in a sports bag when he was a puppy, his little head poking out, surveying his new surroundings. The first time he chased a stick. How he snuggled into Ariran's feet. The comical howling whenever he heard a guitar. As he recounted his life with Iggy, Ariran found himself smiling and laughing.

'Iggy sounded fab', said Janet. 'It's great to hear you talking, you've got a lovely smile.' She caressed his cheek gently. Ariran pulled away. He didn't think she was unattractive, but he'd already decided to leave uniTech. It was time to disconnect, not start relationships. Besides, his head was a maelstrom of dead dog, money worries, academic ambivalence, and memories of a shame-ridden childhood. He could have focused on the moment. On Janet's smile. Her flamboyant eyes. That voluptuous body. A fuck would have done him good, but his mind was a cage. Janet looked uncomfortable. Confused. He wanted her to stay. He wanted to keep talking.

'Can I ask you something, Janet?'

'Sure. We're pals. Ask me anything.'

'What keeps you going? I mean, what's life about for you?'

'Oooh. Well, my family are pretty cool. I want to finish my

studies and become a thothTech. Beautiful sunsets. The night sky. Dancing. And I like having fun.' She nudged Ariran with her elbow.

'Yeah, but what for? What's it all ultimately for?'

'Does it matter?'

'For me, it does. I mean, I just don't get it. I often think it would be better not to exist.'

'Oh. That's heavy. Don't you think you're overthinking it?'

'No, I think most people are underthinking it. It makes me feel so alone. My feet, you know, I damaged them when I tried to kill myself.'

'Oh. Ariran. Poor thing. I didn't know. How insensitive of me.'

'No. It's not that it's, I mean, I like you. I like your company. But I just have this thing, like a weight dragging me down all the time. It gets so exhausting. If there was something that gave the burden meaning, I could maybe struggle through, but I just feel too damned tired. You, you have so much energy. So much life. I'd been talking to a psychTech before I came here. He referred me for further treatment, but I'm still waiting.' He picked a dog-eared piece of paper off his desk. 'This is the referral letter.'

Janet sat up and read the letter. Her body stiffened. 'Indistinct and Ambivalent Personality Disorder? What's that?' she asked, pulling the top of her bathrobe together tightly.

'I'm not sure ... I guess it's what they call it when someone doesn't really want to be alive any more due to a vague but persistent feeling that they don't belong in the world as it is, and, while they don't really want to stay in it, they sort of know there might be a place where they would feel okay, even though they don't know what that would look like or how to get there. Finding that place means staying alive, but the feeling of wanting to escape makes you want to die. I think False Hope Syndrome would be a more accurate term. I mean, I thought uniTech would be the beginning of a new life. My way of building a new world. But all I've achieved is crippling debt, social despair, and utter disappointment. I don't think there'll ever be a real place I would fit in.'

'I'm ... so sorry, I didn't realize you'd tried to commit suicide. That you were having such ... a hard time with this ... disorder.'

'Yeah ... thanks ... I guess I should have thought about it more before I came here, I'm ... well, I'm not really cut out for all this.'

'But you seemed so ... cool.'

'Cool?'

'Yeah. With your leather jacket, and guitar, and late nights, and deep thoughts. You're a mysterious chap, but very likeable when you come out of your shell. I mean, you weren't avoiding me because of what happened with Simon?'

'Who ... er ... what happened?'

'Just a one-nighter, you know. Nothing really.'

'Oh ... er ... right. No, I didn't know. I'm not sure what you ... I'm going to leave here anyway, I can't go on.'

'Oh, really? That bad, huh?'

'Well. I, I feel—'

'Can you talk to someone before you decide?'

'Even if I did, I've no money. I couldn't survive.'

'Oh. So you've made up your mind?'

'Yeah, I guess so.'

'Okay. Listen, I'm going to leave you to it.' Janet gave him a big hug. 'I've got some prep for a lecture tomorrow, but if you need a shoulder to cry on, come find me. You take care.' With that, Janet bounced out of the room.

Suddenly, Ariran felt very alone. More so than ever before. He wished she'd stayed. He missed her kind eyes and cheery voice. The two of them should have been rolling round the bed, naked. He'd fucked up. If he went to her room, he could try to start the encounter over again. But the energy wasn't there. He flopped onto his bed with a sigh. How he hated his life. The sadness. The brokenness. The lonely desperation.

He pictured Janet on his bed. Her lustful looks and deep cleavage. Why didn't he touch her? Let himself be touched? He imagined her coming back angry. No small talk. No bouncing. No smiles. She'd tie him to the bed with the belt of her bathrobe. Torture him out of his mind and into his body, into

the present. Spank his arse and twist his nipples until he begged her to mount him.

Aroused by his fantasy, he began to pleasure himself. Just as he was about to come, another image popped into his head. Janet's sad face as she read his psychTech referral letter. His cock went flaccid. He slapped it angrily. Twisted a nipple hard. Jerked manically. His body throbbed with pain, aching for release. Then he went to the sink, ready to orgasm. There was someone in the mirror. A depressed-looking, lonely, young man. Pale skin. Black bags under his eyes. Raping himself. Instinctively, he released his grip. A tear dripped down his cheek.

The next day, Ariran met with his course thothTech to talk about leaving.

'Come in, Ariran. Sit down. Now, you said on the phone that you weren't sure if you could carry on?'

'Yeah, I ... er ... the course isn't quite what I'd imagined. I mean, it seems like little more than years of soldiering through irrelevant and outdated philosophy. I thought things would be more focused ... you know, on creative thought, interactive, like a living discussion, you know, and ... well ... not all this game playing and historical wallowing.'

The thothTech glanced up from his notepad and flashed Ariran a quick smile before resuming an air of dead professionalism.

'And I was on a waiting list for psychTalk. I tried to kill myself. I'm okay, but I was hoping for some ongoing help, but the waiting lists are so long, not that they'd help anyway, I was having nightmares, and then ... anyway ... I've run out of money and my dog, Iggy, he died. My mother killed him. I think she did it on purpose. Not consciously, you understand? But ... well, she's not very bright ... or self-aware, like she's driven by her unconscious mind, like an automaton, and, well, nothing seems to matter any more.'

Ariran kept talking. He talked more than he had during his whole time at uniTech. The thothTech just listened. He listened like nobody else had in Ariran's life, save for Morris Aylar. Without interruption. Without judgment. Without

attempting to dissuade him from leaving.

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11. Pills

The train lurched into motion. Janet and Belinda stood on the platform, waving and blowing kisses. Ariran was overwhelmed. He waved back and tried to force a smile, but the resulting expression resembled sad disgust. Railways always reminded him of that day. The darkest day. Especially when it was sunny. He'd lost Iggy too. The little dog wouldn't be there when he got home. And his time at uniTech made no sense. He learned nothing. Made no friends. Barely smiled for months. He'd swapped addresses with Phil and Janet, but he already knew there'd be one exchange of letters at most.

Why the two girls helped him cart his belongings to the station mystified him. It was as though they'd all been great friends. Were they projecting a mental fantasy onto him? An idea of a person that they wanted him to be, rather than who he was? Maybe they did know him. Could it be that he wasn't as cold and disconnected as he thought, even if he couldn't relate like a normal person? It didn't matter. He was leaving the factory of academia. Abandoning his quest for approved knowledge, and with it any hope for a better future. It was a place he didn't belong. A plastic world, dominated by honeyed voices, and staged neurological conflict. Now he was going home, back to a familiar abyss; that dark womb of oppressive nothingness.

Mother had decorated the windows ready for the festival of winter lights. Ariran had forgotten what time of year it was. With the remnants of his overdraft, he bought Mother and Tenebray some cheap presents, and went out for drinks with a couple of old friends. Then, the desolation of January arrived. No more uniTech. No serviToil. No hope. No money. No desire. He desperately sought something that seemed worthwhile, something he could put his energy and attention to. Almost everything felt fake. A few things brought relief.

Ways of embracing his gnawing angst and loneliness. Cigarettes under a full moon. Late-night coffee and art-house films. Dripping black paint over rusted metal. Softly fingering dead chords on the guitar. A slow, cheek-to-cheek tango with oblivion. He'd been told repeatedly he had no future in such things. Mother. Grandfather One. Grandfather Two. ThothTechs. They all said so. Tenebray just told him he was shit at everything. That he had no future at all.

Months slipped by. Ariran spent the days sleeping. Nights, watching movies, or attempting to express despair through creation. He wanted to externalize the demons. To give them form and shape. To see them. Hear them. Touch them. Look them in the eye. Acknowledge their beauty, and send them off to another realm. But they would never leave him while he was in that house.

He needed money to escape. Despite trawling the vacant serviToil listings weekly, he could find no position that seemed preferable to ending his life. After many weeks, he spotted an opening with the potential to be tolerable. At least enough to postpone imminent death. Assistant librarian at his hometown uniTech. He applied and was invited to interview.

On arrival, Ariran introduced himself to the receptionist. She seemed friendly, engaging him in light banter. It put him at ease. They had quite a chat. When the call came for him to enter the interview room, he saw the small light on her telephone. The intercom had been live the whole time. His casual conversation had been broadcast to the interview panel. Ariran had told the receptionist how he'd almost missed the bus because he got up late. That he skipped breakfast. How it was the first time he'd been anywhere for months, as he didn't often leave the house. Not now that his dog was dead. Being spied on left him feeling defiled. Deflated, he sat on the hard plastic chair set in front of the five-strong interview panel. It pinched his thighs and made his bottom sweat.

The lead interviewer was a vicious and combative woman. ‘So, you studied philosophy, eh?’

‘Yeah, but I decided it wasn't for me’, Ariran replied, with a

gentle smile.

'I usually find philosophy students to be argumentative and disagreeable', the woman snapped back.

A dead silence fell on the room. Ariran was stumped. She'd set an inescapable trap. It reminded him of a logical paradox. *This statement is false*. A wave of despair flushed down his body. None of the rest of the interview panel would meet his eye.

'I guess I didn't really take to philosophy, which is why I quit', Ariran said with a shrug.

'Do you often quit things?'

'Well ... no ... I mean, I haven't had chance to do much yet.'

'So you don't have much experience?'

'Not professional experience, no, but I was head of the library at skolOpticon and—'

'Do you think that's relevant?'

'Yes, we used the decimal classifi—'

'We don't.'

'Oh. Well, I can learn—'

'We need someone to hit the ground running, we can't carry people here.'

'Oh, the serviToil advert said there would be training.'

'You would get a day or two of orientation, but that's all. Why do think you're the strongest candidate for the role?'

'I don't. I mean, I don't know anything about the other—'

'Okay, I think we're done. Thanks for coming.'

Ariran was taken aback by the brutality. He wondered if it had something to do with his appearance. A nasty bout of psoriasis had caused him to shave his head. It made applying cream easier, but some people assumed such a haircut indicated thuggery. He'd never worked as a professional librarian, but the serviToil advert clearly stated experience was not required. It was low-paid and part-time. Yet, he was still a dud candidate. There to make up the numbers, and be psychologically assaulted for his efforts too. The whole experience made him feel worthless. It reinforced his opinion about the oppressive, unthinking nature of life in kutKish society.

After several weeks spent in a depressive funk, Ariran began to scan the serviToil pages again. The next opening he applied for was door-to-door salesman. Restaurant discount cards. One hundred percent commission. No sales, no pay. His first day involved ten hours tramping the streets with a person identified as his mentor. Tall chap. Early twenties. Low intelligence. Mildly aggressive. Ariran was so focused on his new experience, he forgot about his damaged feet. By mid-afternoon, his ankles began to seize up. When his mentor noticed him limping, he blamed a stone in his shoe and pretended to remove it. Using willpower alone, he suppressed the pain for the rest of the day.

His mentor only bagged two sales. A gross of twenty maudaTech. But it got much worse. The money from sales was distributed within the company. His supervisor got four maudaTech. A further four went to the company. The regional director got eight. Just four maudaTech went to the salesman. It was a pyramid scheme. The mentor spent his entire day's earnings on a beer and a packet of pork scratchings. Ariran was paid nothing for his 'free training'.

At the end of the day, all staff had to attend a compulsory debrief. It was well past nine o'clock when Ariran witnessed his mentor being told some 'hard truths'. He was a worthless idiot. An embarrassment. A let-down who should be living on the streets. But they would give him one last chance. He could turn it all around the next day. The mentor apologized, thanking the manager for his generosity and forgiveness. Ariran was asked if he could do better. He said he could. That was the only test. He was told to return the next morning to start his serviToil.

Exploiting the kutKish this way was easy. There was an endless supply of naive and desperate people. Willing servants, triggered by eleLazi propaganda campaigns. Decades of daily bulletins telling people they were contemptible and lazy without serviToil. That anybody who made the effort could be financially successful, and that opportunities were available to the willing. It was a lie.

The pyramid scheme of the sales company was a

microcosm of the mahiThist macroeconomy. A privileged few leeching off the lives of a frantic horde. The company had at least forty street walkers in Ariran's area alone. If all the sellers only managed the same atrocious sales as his mentor, the boss would still be making three hundred and twenty maudaTech per day. He did nothing for it, except for delivering a motivational talk in the morning and a psychological kicking in the evening.

The motivational sessions were brazen assaults of neurolinguistic programming. Everyone joined a ritual circle, chanting about how they were going to get rich, and how much they loved money. They couldn't like it, they had to love it. There was clapping, clenched fists punching the air, and a strange murmuring chant to prelude outrageous bursts of volume. Those who shouted loudest were singled out for praise. Heresy wasn't tolerated. Failure to sell was framed as personal inadequacy. Lack of passion. Poor serviToil ethic. A bad attitude. The sign of a worthless individual. It was a savage cult of evangelical, nihilistic materialism.

The following morning, Ariran's joints were so sore he could barely move. Upon examining his feet, he found a surgical pin working its way loose. It was pressing against the scar tissue on his left foot. Clearly, any serviToil requiring him to be on his feet all day was going to be impossible. He didn't bother calling the company to let them know he wasn't joining their cult.

His mood darkened again. Worse than anything he'd experienced before. He took to his bed. After several days, he settled into a routine. He'd rise mid-afternoon, drink a strong coffee, and then drag himself out for a slow lumbering walk around the local park, before returning to bed again. Sometimes, he would wake up late at night and watch TV for an hour or two. The pins in his feet continued to work their way loose. By May, five months after leaving uniTech, one of them popped through the skin causing profuse bleeding. Ariran tried to push it back in, but neither a hammer nor pliers would shift it.

A week later, he was on the operating table to have the pins

removed. Then, back on his walking stick. He understood better now how his injuries would always hamper his life. Always cause pain and discomfort, despite being invisible to other people. He'd known this since the day he jumped, but suddenly, that knowledge felt real. Deep in his body. In the cells of his bones. Previously, it had been abstract, like he was viewing himself as a third party. Some days, he could be active. Other days, the pain would be too great. Yet, society demanded consistency and simplicity. You could either walk or you couldn't. No variation or complexity was permitted in the mind of the kutKish. Being able to walk okay several days per week, but not on others, made you a faker, a liar. Not someone with a fluctuating health condition. If you could move, you moved. If it was painful, you took gut-rotting painkillers. You didn't rest and recover. *Numb Thyself*, was their first commandment.

Ariran took to planning his suicide again. This time, he'd do it properly. He negotiated an increased overdraft, dishonestly telling the bank manager he was still at uniTech. Once the funds were available, he caught the bus into the city centre and booked into a hotel. A room on one of the upper floors. Then, he went out and bought a bottle of whisky and a large jar of deMetaMal™. One hundred tablets. Those days, there were no restrictions, so he wasn't forced to visit multiple stores to acquire a lethal dose. He'd jump too. Nighttime would be best. Less chance of being seen. Less chance of receiving medical attention if he didn't die instantly.

With time to kill before dusk, he took a final walk around town. Out on the streets, nothing seemed real. Mechanical, wax dummies mingled in stochastic swarms. A bubbling brew of futility. The noise of the hustle and bustle sounded muffled and far away. Ariran stopped for a solitary coffee in a cheap cafe and watched the world pass by. Parents dragged their sulking children by the wrist. Mothers weaponized prams, ramming their way through the crowds. Couples argued, embittered with mutual disappointment. Lonely women, caked in makeup, struggled with armfuls of shopping bags. Haggard men, wearing shiny tracksuits, slipped into betting

shops, determined to purge all remnants of hope. A beggar was surrounded by a gang of youths. They shouted abuse and showered him in spit. Empty crisp packets and plastic bags whirled in eddies; dervishes of decay. He wouldn't miss this world.

After finishing his coffee, he walked slowly back toward the hotel. An old man appeared in front of him, blocking his path.

'Excuse me', mumbled Ariran.

'Hi there', said the old man, grinning. 'What's going on here?'

'High? There? Here? What do you mean? I want to get past. Can you move?'

'This is no good! Where are you going?'

'I'm going to the hotel, not that it's your business', Ariran replied, pointing with the tip of his walking stick.

The chubby, old man's eyes pierced Ariran's very essence. He seemed to shimmer with energy, unlike the rest of the wax dummy people.

'This is no good, no good at all', the man said, shaking his head. 'A good-looking young man like you. Why don't you take yourself off to a bar or disco, pick up a girl, go dancing?'

Ariran pointed his chin toward his walking stick, 'Dancing?'

'You're not in bad condition. You can stand. You can walk. You could dance a little. This is no good at all. Go get yourself a woman.'

'A woman? Get one? I can't afford a prostitute.'

'No, no, no. A handsome specimen like you, you don't need to pay for it, boy! Get out there and find someone.'

'But, I can't ... I mean, I don't see the point, none of this is real.'

'Not real, boy? And exactly what do you mean by that?'

'Well, it's a program. Breeding, sex, love, relationships, we're programmed for it. Besides, look all around us. It's insanity.'

'And what would sanity look like?'

'I'm not sure, not like this. I mean, do you see happy people?'

'You know what? No. I don't see happy people. Happy

people don't exist. I see some people who are currently happy, some who are sad, some who are anxious, and so on, but all these feelings will pass. People experience emotions, they aren't defined by them. You don't have to be like them anyway. You can be who you want to be. And so what if love is a program? What difference is it to you?'

'Well, if it isn't real—'

'There you go again. Not real. And what is real to you?'

'Well, I ... nothing, I guess.'

'Nothing? If *nothing* is real, how can you even know what real is?'

'I just know. In my heart.'

'Sure, and see all these people, they just know too, they just know you're wrong.'

'I'm not wrong.'

'Well, never you mind about that. What difference is it to you if you're wrong?'

'I have to go.'

'Ah, always running. Well, you think about it, Ariran, get yourself out there and live. Surely you can't think you will find the real some other way?'

'But, it's not what I want.'

'Want? What is it that you want?'

'Nothing.'

'Here.' The old man held out an empty hand. 'Here is nothing. Take it. Now you have it. Now what?'

'No, no. I don't want to experience nothing. I don't want to experience anything.'

'You're a strange loop, aren't you boy? Where do you think this wanting to experience nothing comes from? Or the desire to not experience anything, as you put it. Do tell me.'

'Well, from time, I guess.'

'And you want to what? End time?'

'For me, yes.'

'By the will of the greatGlow. You can't find what you don't look for, boy. Look, you'll see.'

'Are you with the time-po—'

'Enough of this, boy. So sad, so very, very sad. Time I was

gone.' Then, the man walked on, knocking Ariran's shoulder as he passed.

Ariran was flummoxed. He stood for a moment, trying to gather his thoughts. How did the man know his name? He spun around quickly, intending to call the man back, but he was gone.

Questions continued to swirl around Ariran's head as he entered the hotel lobby. The young receptionist greeted him with a big smile and a wink. He wondered if she was being friendly, or if her wink indicated something else. Maybe she was interested in visiting his room, or perhaps she was giving covert encouragement for him to complete his suicide. He wondered if she was in cahoots with the man in the street; another member of the time-poliTech. Perhaps she had a twitch.

Ariran sat on the bed in his hotel room and lay the pills out. There were a lot. He felt pathetic. That guy might have been right. After all, he was a young man with a bottle of whisky and a hotel room at his disposal. He stood in front of the full-length mirror at the far side of the room. Dirty, scruffy basketball boots. Pale, blue jeans. Baggy and creased. A little too short. An old, tweed jacket that smelled of charity shops. A cream jumper with a black zigzag across the chest. He'd never really looked at it before. It was comfy, so he wore it. Now he could see the jarring angles. The intricate weave of the ageing wool. His walking stick completed the look. He looked like a suicide. What could he say to pick up a woman when he looked like that? 'Hi, how's it going? I'm Ariran, I'm planning to kill myself but, before I do, I wonder if you have a fetish for mental patients with psoriasis, poor fashion sense, and a limp?'

At eight o'clock, he cracked open the whisky. A budget blend. The harsh, chemical aroma seared his nostrils. It tasted of burning acid, with delicate overtones of sour caramel and furniture polish. A perfect accompaniment to the bitter flavour of deMetaMal™. Ariran chewed up the first few mouthfuls to get the pills into his system faster, but the taste was so foul he resorted to knocking them back whole.

By ten-thirty, his heart was beating hard and fast. Two-thirds of the tablets were gone. The bottle of whisky was empty. He walked over to the window. All the inhabited rooms, the ones with lights on, had closed their curtains. The rest of the rooms looked empty. The time had come. Ariran twisted the handle on the window and pulled it. It hit a metal safety catch with a loud clunk. A gap limited to a hand's width. The catch was welded into the frame. Impossible to remove. His heart sank.

He'd taken enough pills to die but was now facing a slow death. Maybe he could use a chair, smash the window. Or take a running jump and dive straight through it. But what if he failed? Hotel security would arrive. They would see evidence of the overdose. He'd be rushed to hospiTech. Forced to vomit and drink charcoal. Then he'd have to explain everything and pay for the damage. He imagined the mediTechs and fireTechs lifting his semi-limp body off the edge of the broken pane of glass, laughing at yet another failed effort, while he screamed in pain. It wasn't worth the risk. Maybe he could cut his throat, but he hadn't brought a razor. There was nothing sharp in the room. Smashing the whisky bottle might alert security. The only cutlery was a teaspoon. He pressed it against his throat. No chance. He thought of going downstairs to the road so he could throw himself in front of a bus or a fast car. But he feared he might collapse, or puke from the overdose. Then, someone would call for help. He resigned himself to seeing the night through and lay on the bed. The drugs would seal his fate.

12. Escape

Ariran leant back against the wall, next to the vomit-filled toilet bowl. Suddenly struck by the beauty of the hotel bathroom, he smiled. Then he vomited again. Some of the sick splashed back into his face. The bath looked inviting. He wondered whether buying bubble bath and candles would have been a better idea than whisky and deMetaMal™. The bathroom suite was well-proportioned with a vintage angular design. He imagined relaxing in the tub, sober, enjoying the soft glow of candles and their dancing shadows. An amniotic annihilation. Eventually, the retching subsided. He went back to bed, exhausted.

At six in the morning, he woke with a start. The stink of vomit filled his nostrils. In front of him, on the pillow, was a large puddle of sticky sick. He sat up and retched a couple of dry heaves. Realizing he was neither dead nor unconscious, he pondered what to do. Lying there indefinitely wasn't an option. It was a ten o'clock checkout. The cleaning staff would be coming in. Reluctantly, he reached over to the phone at the side of the bed.

'Overdose sir? I see', said the receptionist calmly. 'Which room are you in?'

'Four three two.'

'Okay, stay there. Someone will be with you shortly.'

Five minutes later, the hotel manager let himself in. He assessed the situation. Vomit. A depleted jar of pills. An empty bottle of whisky. A pair of sullen, swollen eyes, peeking out from a pale, droopy face. Ariran was told to stay where he was. The manager left. He returned ten minutes later with two mediReps. They bundled Ariran into a folding wheelchair and strapped him in.

One of the mediReps picked up the deMetaMal™ jar. 'How many pills were in here, mate?'

'It was full', replied Ariran.

'Full?'

'Yes.'

'It says one hundred pills on the label here, mate, and you're saying you've taken all of them except these?' The mediRep shook the jar, tinkling the few remaining pills in the bottom.

'Yes.'

'Aaah. I see. Well ... I've got bad news for you, mate. You're probably going to die, and it won't be nice. Most likely slow and painful. It can take a few days. You swell up. Your organs fail one by one. Best that you know.' He turned to his colleague. 'Isn't this the same room that mediTech student topped himself in, last year?'

'Yeah, it is ... except he knew what he was doing,' the other answered, 'and he had a proper sharp knife. Remember all the blood?'

'Sure do.' The first mediTech turned back to Ariran. 'Have you got family?'

'Yes, a mum ... and a sister.'

'How could you do this to them?'

'Do what to them?'

'Didn't you think about them before you did this?'

'Yes. Do you think she thought about me before bringing me into this sick world?'

'She gave you a gift, mate, you should make the most of it.'

'A dogshit more like. I didn't ask for it. I didn't want it. What would you know anyway? You know fuck all about me! If someone gave you a plate of sick, would you eat it, or throw it back in their face?'

The second mediTech intervened. 'Okay, that's enough. Let's get him to the hospiTech.'

The manager was keen not to upset the hotel guests, so Ariran was wheeled to the service lift and taken to the rear loading bay. There, he was quietly dispatched in a mediBus. Despite feeling very ill, Ariran began to feel angry with the mediRep. *Bollocks to him and bollocks to his questions*, he thought. *Talk about kicking a man while he's down! I'm dying,*

he said so. Then it hit him. He was dying. Probably. Despite elements of his plan having failed, he'd still done it. Achieved his goal. A feeling of supreme peace washed over him. He smiled.

'You think this is funny?' snapped the first mediRep.

Ariran ignored him. That dolt would never understand. Another wax dummy with a profane understanding of life. He looked the guy over. At a guess, he put him at fifty-years-old. A large pot-belly was threatening to burst the buttons on his shirt. His mouth hid behind a chunky brown moustache. Probably ex-military with a drink problem. A suicide in slow motion. Ariran guessed the guy had never thought much about existence. That angry, knee-jerk defensiveness was his shield from deep contemplation. There was little point speaking with such people.

In the hospiTech, the first blood test showed Ariran's deMetaMal™ levels were extremely high. Almost certainly lethal. It was too late for them to evacuate his stomach or administer charcoal. A mediTech confirmed what the mediRep had told him. He would likely suffer a slow and painful death over several days. A paliTech plugged his arm into a drip and asked for emergency contact details. He refused to provide any, telling her he wanted to die in peace. She insisted. Relenting, he gave her Martin's number. An old friend.

When Martin arrived, he told Ariran that he'd called Tenebray to let her know. She would inform Mother.

'Fuck, no, Martin, why did you do that?'

'They'll want to know, they'll be worried about you.'

'No, you don't understand. I'm going to die, and they'll make me suffer more, I wish—'

At that moment, Tenebray walked in. 'What the fuck's this? You fucking druggie!'

'No, Tenebray, it's an overdose', Martin said softly.

'Yeah, he's a fucking druggie, get your life together, look what you're doing to Mother.'

'No, a deMetaMal™ overdose', Martin said, a little more firmly.

Ariran had been silent, but his sister's outburst triggered

his rage. 'WHAT THE FUCK ARE YOU DOING HERE? GET OUT, LET ME DIE IN PEACE, YOU CUNT!'

'FUCKING DIE THEN, YOU PRICK', Tenebray shouted back before storming out of the ward.

'You can see what I've had to live with all my life', Ariran said to Martin.

'Yeah ... well, I didn't realize ... I guess she's angry that—'

'She's a heartless bully. I owe her nothing.'

'I'm going to get a cup of tea, do you want anything?'

'Cyanide?'

Several hours later, a mediTech delivered the results of a further blood test. He eyed Ariran suspiciously before speaking. 'It seems someone is looking after you. Your latest blood test shows that your deMetaMal™ levels have halved. There are no signs of organ damage at the moment. We ... well ... we can't understand it. You're not out of the woods yet, kid, but it looks like you're going to be okay.'

'Okay? There must be some mistake, I'm supposed to be dying. I mean, I want to die.'

'Well. We can talk about that tomorrow. For now, you need to get some rest and keep drinking plenty of water.'

PaliTechs attended Ariran periodically. Checked his pulse. Shone a torch in his eyes. Encouraged him to drink water. Took more blood. By the following day, only trace levels of deMetaMal™ remained. All other functional indicators were normal. Ariran felt fine. He wasn't swelling up or in pain. The mediTech returned to speak with him.

'Are you sure you took all those pills?' he inquired.

'Yeah, I did vomit a lot though.'

'Maybe that's it.'

'But ... the blood test yesterday, you said I was going to die.'

'Yes ... well, it must have been an error, we all make mistakes. It looks like you'll be getting a second chance, you're a lucky fellow.'

'Lucky, you think?'

'Maybe it doesn't feel that way right now, but that might change.'

'So, when will I be discharged?'

'Tomorrow morning. But you're not going home, we're sending you to a ward.'

'A ward?'

'Psych hospiTech, provided we can reserve a bed.'

Ariran was relieved. The thought of having to go home, back to his lifeless routine, his stupid mother and her lack of empathy, and that cramped terraced house, it was enough to make him run outside and dive head-first into busy traffic.

The following day, he was strapped into another wheelchair and transferred to the psych hospiTech. Two male hondTechs were sent to collect him. Low paid auxiliary staff. Spare hands. No medical training. No psychological qualifications. They released him from the wheelchair once he was inside, behind locked doors. He'd been placed in one of three wards. A hondTech told him he was lucky he'd got onto the quiet ward. Apparently, there were some 'right weirdos' on the other wards. Because his bed wasn't ready, they took him to the dining room for an introductory talk.

Ariran was told how his life would be organized. Medication times. Afternoon tea. Activities. Meal times. Lights out. He was expected to attend meals and take his medication. The rest of the time, he could do what he wanted. Sleep. Watch TV. Take part in an activity, if there were any. He was not to attempt to leave. The ward door was locked. There were two further locked doors between the lobby and the outside world. Friendly advice was offered—steer clear of any patients who might be having 'an episode'. Finally, he was told that if he was well-behaved, he might be allowed out for fresh air in a few days. If he was badly behaved, he could end up in the isolation room. A six-foot by four-foot cell. Padded walls, floor, and door. Sound-proofed. No windows. No pictures. No furniture. The only light switch was on the outside. Ariran realized he was not really in a hospiTech, he was in a high security prison.

Induction talk over, he was left sitting at an empty table in the dining room. Ariran didn't mind. Alongside reclining and lying down, sitting was one of his favourite activities. While he

sat, he contemplated the events of the previous days. Maybe he had died and was now in purgatory. Or maybe his consciousness had jumped to a parallel reality. Perhaps suicide was no way out. If he succeeded to end the absurdity in one time-slice of the universe, he was simply catapulted into another, similar to the last one but a little worse. Maybe every time he killed himself, the degradation would continue. Eventually, he would be forced to surrender; acquiesce to the slavery of existence. The longer he took to learn his lesson, the worse his chosen reality would be. His heart fluttered. Had he died when he jumped from the window ledge at the skolOpticon? Life had always seemed like a dream but more so since then.

One of the patients approached him. A slender mekaZien woman with a pretty face, albeit pale and weary. Her pupils were extremely dilated, a subtle glow emanated from the centre of the blackness. She spoke in a loud whisper, 'Hi, I Lu, what you here for?'

'Oh ... er ... I tried to kill myself', Ariran answered.

'Me too. Want get out. Finish job.'

'How'd you do it?'

'Overdose. Antidepressants. Vodka. Was unconscious. Now here. Don't talk to them. They're spies. Everything recorded. They use everything you say, keep you here. Act normal. Take medication. Out soon. Finish job.' She winked as she spoke these last words.

'Lu, how long have you been here?'

'Shhhh!' she hissed, putting her finger to her lips. 'Enough questions. I tired, and you might be spy.'

'I'm not a spy.'

'Hmmm, maybe, but would say that, wouldn't you? Don't look like mental patient.'

'What's a mental patient supposed to look like.'

'You too calm. Too upright. Not depressed.'

'I don't think I'm depressed, I don't want to live, that's all.'

'Shhhhh! Don't tell. Never get out.'

'Oh ... er ... okay.'

'My name Lu.'

'Yes, I know.'

'Ha! I knew you spy. How else you know?'

'You told me, just before.'

'Don't think so.'

'Yes, you did.'

'Maybe, or maybe you spy. Have to go.'

'Don't go, I like talking to you.'

'Must go.' Lu lowered her head until her chin touched her chest. She shuffled out of the lounge in her floppy hospiTech slippers.

One of the male hondTechs came to show Ariran to his bed. The four rooms on the ward were segregated according to sex. Two for males. Two for females. Each room was square with a bed in each corner. In Ariran's room, the two occupants farthest from the door were elsewhere. Curtains had been drawn around the bed opposite his. Through a gap in the curtains, he could see a thrashing movement under the blankets.

'Don't worry about Mickey,' said the hondTech, 'he's always doing that. Come on, stop playing with yourself, Mickey, you've got a new neighbour.'

'I can't stop, that's why I'm here', Mickey grunted.

'This chap doesn't want to see you doing that, and neither do I.'

'Uh. Uh. Ahhh. No worries, I've finished now', sighed Mickey, laying back in his bed.

This is the quiet ward? thought Ariran. He guessed Mickey wasn't doing any harm, but it would be difficult to get used to this sort of behaviour. The hondTech left.

'Are you really locked in here for wanking?' Ariran asked Mickey.

Mickey pulled his curtain back. 'Yeah. Sure am. Third time this year! I jerk off at least ten times a day. Can't help it. On the bus. In the shops. In front of my ma. I don't do it on purpose. I just find my hand moving up and down. I can't stop it. Ma used to encourage me. It helped me relax. Now she's sick of it. And they hate it on the bus. That's why I'm here this time. They called the poliTech. Third time this year. So long as

I'm in treatment, they won't send me to prison. How often do you come?'

'Come? To the hospiTech?'

'Yep.'

'Well, I'm not really a regular. It's my first time. Doesn't it hurt? Ten times a day. It must dry up. Get sore?'

'Yep. It hurts alright. I've got segs on my mushroom, and cracked skin. Sometimes it bleeds. Why are you here?'

'I tried to kill myself.'

'Suicide? I don't get it. You nutters and your suicide.'

'You've never considered it?'

'No. Never. What's the point? You'll die one day anyway. Have you got any cigarettes?'

'No ... oh, yes.' Ariran remembered he had a crumpled pack of baccHo™ lights in his jacket. He was about to hand the pack to Mickey, but decided to remove a cigarette and lob it over instead.

Mickey picked it up and inspected it. 'Lights? No way. Not me. I smoke these.' He took out a packet of short, filterless cigarettes. 'Come on suicide, I'll show you the smoke room, we'll get a right kicking if we light up in here.'

The smoke room was the dining room. Six highly varnished plywood tables with slender, chrome legs. Four matching chairs around each one. Foil ashtray centrepieces. One end of the room had a serving hatch with a roller shutter. At the opposite end was an armchair and two-seater couch. The side of the room adjacent to the corridor had glass windows, reinforced with fine metal mesh. The walls were painted with wipe-clean, beige gloss, and decorated with a couple of medium-sized art prints. Perspex frames. Screwed flat to the wall.

Mickey was very short. Less than five feet. His head was almost exactly cube-shaped. Eyelids, slightly deformed. Gravelly, baritone voice. Ariran was struck by how little neck he had. Whenever he spoke, the tops of his shoulders would move up and down like he was shrugging. Even at rest, they almost touched his ears. Mickey held his lighter up for Ariran. The faint odour of cum wafted off his short, calloused fingers.

Ariran sucked some smoke up his nose to get rid of the whiff. Mickey smoked his entire filterless in one draw, then dropped the lit end in the ashtray without stubbing it out. It continued to smoulder. He got up and walked over toward a tall, thin woman sat at another table. Her head was bowed. She was reading a book but looked up as he got closer. 'Fuck off, Mickey!' she barked.

His hand was already in his pants, stroking wildly. 'Oh. I only came to say hello. Sorry, uh, can't help it.'

'JUST FUCK OFF, MICKEY!' she shouted.

A female hondTech ran in. 'Come on, pack it in Mickey, back to your room.' Mickey was ushered out, hand in pants.

The tall, thin woman looked over toward Ariran. 'Hi', she mouthed silently.

'Hi', he replied, in a loud whisper, raising his hand in a stiff wave. 'What are you reading?'

'Oh. This. It's a book. Do you read?'

'Yeah. But I haven't anything with me. They sent me straight from the hospiTech.'

'Me too. My husband brought this in for me. He wants me home. I've been in for eight weeks now, but I'm no better ... don't tell them that, will you?'

'No, of course not. I'm Ariran.'

'Miranda.'

'Hi, Miranda, what book is it?'

'A Most Unusual Path Home. Do you know it?'

'No.'

'I'll lend it to you when I finish.' Miranda tried to force a shallow smile, but had forgotten how. Her eyes looked dark and spent. She stood up. Pulled the crumpled sleeves of her flowery, purple top, down to the wrists, covering the scars on her arms, then left the room. She didn't walk, so much as float on a cloud of sadness. Ariran had never seen someone look so sick and yet so beautiful.

Raucous singing echoed into the dining room from the corridor. It got louder and louder. The singer entered. A big-boned, young man. Crumpled, white t-shirt. Sagging, black jogging pants. Tatty flip-flops. The smell of stale urine and

body odour followed wherever he went. He wore cheap earbuds attached to a portable cassette player. His body jerked stiffly, like he'd been wrapped in cellophane and was being zapped with a cattle prod. A thick dribble of drool hung from the corner of his mouth.

One of the male hondTechs appeared. 'Come on, Jed! I've told you. No singing.'

Ariran wondered what the rules were about singing. The guy was loud and out of tune. A little irritating, but not exactly dangerous. Why not let the man sing? Jed felt the same. He began to sing even louder.

'JED!' shouted the hondTech. 'You don't want to go to the naughty room, do you?'

'FUCK YOU. LA LA LA LA LA LA.'

The hondTech pressed a red button on the wall. A buzzer sounded. A light flashed in the corridor. The sound of fast-moving footsteps followed. Three more hondTechs appeared. One was built like a rugby player. A mound of boulders for a chest. Stubby, muscular legs. Ears like trampled mushrooms. He grabbed Jed in a bear hug, trapping his arms. Jed tried to struggle as he was dragged out of the dining room. Ariran saw what happened next through the open door. Mr Rugby continued to hold Jed tightly. Two of the other hondTechs grabbed a leg each and pulled. Thud! Jed hit the floor. Mr Rugby landed on top of him, pinning him to the ground. Jed's arms and legs were immobilized by the other hondTechs. A fifth hondTech appeared. She stabbed a needle into Jed's arm through his clothes. A few seconds later, he stopped struggling. His head lolled to one side. Two of the male hondTechs grabbed an arm each and pulled Jed along the polished floor of the corridor out of sight. Ariran heard a heavy door open. Then shut. The shake of keys. The click of a lock. It all seemed unnecessarily brutal. Ariran made a mental note to avoid singing, should the urge arise.

Medication was administered four times a day. Ariran was only required to attend once in the morning for an antidepressant. It was the only time he saw some patients; they spent their days and nights in bed. Jed wasn't around

much after he got locked up. He spent twenty-four hours in solitary. When they took him out, he was covered in shit and piss. They wouldn't let him out to use the bathroom. For his safety, of course. The padded cell was wiped over with a bleach-soaked mop. More sedatives were added to Jed's meds. Now he was a complete zombie. Lifeless eyes. No singing. A rigid, stony expression, tinged with sadness.

Lu and Miranda were often around. Along with Ariran, they usually attended the one activity that existed on the ward. Art group. It ran from two until four on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons. Patients were provided with a pile of loose paper, crayons, brushes, and some cheap paint. All items were counted before and after each session, except the paper. Ariran painted imaginary images of the cosmos. Starscapes, novas, and galaxies. Dark paintings. Lots of black, purple, and blue, splattered with the odd fleck of white, red, and golden yellow.

Lu didn't bother to create anything. She shuffled in and out of the room. Sometimes, she whispered compliments to people. Then she would declare that she was no good at art. No good at anything. Ariran tried to encourage her to join in. She reacted badly, telling him he was a spy. Seeing that she'd upset him, she amended her accusation. He was a nice spy. She liked him. But she had to be careful. He might be trying to get information out of her. After a while, she confessed that she was good at art, once. She didn't paint or draw in the hospiTech in case she gave something important away to the spies. Something from her subconscious.

Miranda remained deeply depressed. She sometimes made drawings with crayons or coloured pencils. Cute little pictures of a house with a green garden and picket fence. Always with a shadowy figure, peering out of a window. And a solitary rain cloud over the roof. Once she finished drawing, she sat reading, periodically flashing a timid smile at Ariran. The day she finished the last chapter, she loaned the book to him as promised. He had little else to do outside of art class and plunged into it, spending most of the following week smoking and reading in the dining room.

It was an unusual book, recognizing affliction as the foundation of existence. The author asserted that life was about dancing with suffering, not avoiding or escaping it. She criticized greedy, narcissistic 'leaders' and 'kings' for not having enough self-discipline, and singled out bad parents for especially vitriolic treatment. Especially those who resorted to physical violence.

Unsure if it was the medication, the company of other troubled souls, or the book, Ariran found his mood changed dramatically. An energy and enthusiasm took hold. Something he'd lacked for years, possibly forever. The staff were pleased with his progress. He was an easy patient. 'Well-behaved.' It felt more of an insult than a compliment.

The day he finished the book, Miranda announced she was to be discharged. Ariran felt incredibly sad.

'I'll miss you', he told her.

Miranda sighed, 'I'm not ready, but they want me out. My husband is coming to collect me in the morning. I really don't want to go, he's ...'

'He's what?'

'Well ... he ... he doesn't understand. You understand, don't you?'

'I think so.'

'Sometimes he ... I know you wouldn't ...'

'Wouldn't what?' Ariran was desperate to know. It was clear the man wasn't capable of loving such a rare and delicate soul. Yet, so many got trapped in relationships that were sour and closeted. It was like planting a beautiful tree orchid in thick, wet clay. Such dense earth smothers and suffocates them.

'Wouldn't what?' insisted Ariran.

'Nothing. I've brought you a present', she said, handing him a brown paper bag.

'Oh, you shouldn't have.'

'No, it's important to me.'

'Thanks. I've nothing for you. Not that I could get anything, except for a can from the vending machine.'

'Never you mind. It's a book. About you', she said with a

wink. 'You'll need this for your journey.'

'You winked?'

'Uh huh.'

'What did you mean?'

'Oh, you know', she said, winking again.

'No, please tell me, I find winks so confusing.'

'Well, if I could tell you, I wouldn't need to wink, would I? Why don't you wink at me and see what it feels like?'

'Yeah, it's not like I've never winked you know', said Ariran, with a wink.

'There, and what did you mean by it?'

'I don't really know, you know, like, you know', he winked again.

'See. Nobody really knows what they're trying to say when they're winking, do they? It's supposed to be ambiguous, but don't you feel it somehow communicates more of an aliveness than words?'

'Yeah, I guess so, but it could easily be misunderstood, that makes it a bit dangerous.'

'Sure, danger is alive, certainty is dead.'

'Ah. I guess. Here, I've finished reading your other book, you can have it back.'

'Oh, I don't need it. You keep it.'

'Okay, thanks. Maybe I'll pass it on.'

Ariran took her gift out of the bag. The book cover showed a cartoon of a blond boy dressed in green pants, standing on a small planet that looked like a beetroot. The boy gazed at the stars with a bewildered expression. Inside the front cover was written, *Dearest Ariran, take care on your journey, all my love, Miranda xxx.* Ariran blushed and quickly flicked to the first chapter. The opening gambit told about a child drawing a picture of a boa constrictor who'd eaten an animal. Ariran smiled, pretending he was smiling at the story. Really, he was smiling because of Miranda's show of affection. All my love, she'd written. Her handwriting was very neat. Thin. Slanted. Ornate loops and embellishments. As attractive to Ariran as her pale, skinny sadness. The two of them sat together in silence for a further half hour until Miranda decided to leave

for a nap.

While she was sleeping, Ariran penned a short poem, a parting gift. He used the brown paper bag and a betting shop pen he'd found on a window ledge. Despite his improved mood, the words of his poem, *The Blessed Heralds of Death*, were dark as ever. He gave the poem to Miranda after dinner, once the room had emptied of other patients. She seemed touched, but she didn't say, so he wasn't sure. The two of them sat close together on the sofa, talking for hours. At ten o'clock, Miranda said she was going for a bath to relax, ready for her departure.

Baths were privileges and rarely allowed. Bathers usually had to be monitored. The bathroom door was reinforced with an obscured glass window. It had no lock. Inside, was a movable screen for privacy when changing. It wasn't permitted to position it between the bath and the door. Ariran only took showers. He wasn't comfortable with the idea of someone sitting in the room as he bathed, nor of being seen through the obscured glass from the corridor. The hondTechs tended to leave him to it in the shower, so long as he was out within five minutes.

Initially, they denied Miranda her bath, telling her to wait until she got home. She told them she wanted to be clean and fresh for her husband. For the outside world. If they judged her well enough to be discharged, surely bathing herself would be no problem. They could leave her alone, she would be no trouble. A clever plan. She timed her bath to coincide with a change of staff. The hondTechs ending their shift were keen to get home. During handover to the incoming shift, they forgot to mention Miranda was in the bath.

The night staff were soon busy dishing out evening meds. At midnight check, they discovered Miranda wasn't in bed. Midnight was the latest patients were allowed to stay up. Ariran was in bed awake. He heard them walking the rounds. Footsteps. Relaxed voices. More footsteps. Worried voices. More footsteps. The door of the bathroom opened. Frantic voices.

'Oh no! Fuck me!' cried a male hondTech, 'Miranda, what

have you done? Miranda? Miranda? Fuck. We're in the shit now.'

An alarm sounded, heralding a cacophony of panic. Frenzied footsteps. Agitated voices. Bleeping doors. Ringing phones. Wailing patients. Ariran wanted to get up and look, but a heavy weight pinned him to his bed. His body shivered with a sensation like fine grains of ice-cold sand flowing deep under his skin. She was gone. Somehow, Miranda had managed to drown herself in a few inches of tepid water. Ariran was immensely sad, yet a part of him was glad for her. She'd achieved her peace. No more sorrow. No more suffering. No more uncertainty.

A week after Miranda's death, Ariran was called into a meeting with a cheerful, tubby man. He wore distinctive attire. A hand-tailored, brown tweed suit. A bright orange shirt. A large, red bow tie. Regional director of psych hospiTech services. A very important man. It was unusual for him to see a patient in person, but Ariran's old psychTech, Mr Aylar, the one who wore sandals and novelty socks, he'd made a strong recommendation for Ariran to be sent to a psychTalk community for intensive treatment. The meeting was an informal assessment of Ariran's suitability for referral. After a twenty-minute chat, the red bow tie had heard enough. Ariran would be informed in due course. Meanwhile, he would be discharged.

Back home, Ariran felt like a different person. The prospect of spending a year in psychTalk, hundreds of miles away, was daunting but exciting. If admitted, he was required to spend at least one weekend in two at home, but Mother's house didn't feel like a trap any more. It would be a new start. Soon enough, he received news that funding had been agreed, subject to the outcome of an interview at the facility.

The journey to the psychTalk community took five and a half hours by train. Ariran arrived at the great, white mansion late in the afternoon. The director met him in the lobby and took him to his office. He had an austere posture, and dressed like a skolOpticon thothTech, but spoke softly through his thick beard. Peering over brass-rimmed spectacles, he asked

Ariran a barrage of searching questions. Sexual fantasies. Suicidal thoughts. Recurring dreams. Plans for the future. Ariran answered as best he could. Afterwards, he was shown around the building. Then he left for the long journey home. A letter arrived three days later offering him a place.

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13. Clara

The psychTalk community was unusual. Welcoming and friendly. All adult patients were involved in domestic duties. Cooking. Cleaning. Chairing meetings. Planning and organizing group activities. Ariran was kept busy. He couldn't help but socialize and make friends.

With the help of others, patients were expected to manage suicidal urges, and repeated self-harm resulted in termination of treatment. Nobody was locked in, there was an open-door policy. Any patient could sign themselves out during the daytime, on condition they didn't go alone. Having at least one companion made self-harm, and substance abuse, more difficult, but it also created a structure that enabled shy people, like Ariran, to make friends.

He spent a lot of time with a young woman, Clara. Long auburn hair. Broad eriNis accent. Playful. She visited the local shops daily to buy cigarettes and always asked Ariran to accompany her. They got to know each other intimately. He'd never felt the presence of another so deeply. A natural connection of two souls. Soon, the pair were spending all their spare time together. Chatting. Walking in the garden. Listening to music. Playing board games. When Ariran looked into her lush, green eyes, he found it very difficult to look away.

The pair organized trips to the local pool. Accompanied by a supervising paliTech, they taught some of the children to swim. Ariran loved swimming, and his time with the kids was joyful. Clara loved children too, but revealed, with sadness, that she was incapable of bearing any. Despite her fears, the fact that Clara was unable to have children only made her all the more attractive. Ariran had no desire for any of his own. Childminding for a couple of hours once or twice a week was fine with him. He'd long since decided never to burden another

person with the troubles of life. It wasn't just a lifestyle preference, but a moral decision made in contemplation of the bigger picture—the whole life of that person and the adult they would become, not just their childhood. He imagined facing his grown-up offspring, trying to explain why he brought them into the world. The pain, poverty, suffering, war, disease, depression, oppression, pollution, poison, pointlessness, manipulation, betrayal, and disaster. On balance, he could find no rational basis for creating a new life.

Ariran considered breeding to be a cold genetic drive. An urge created by hormones and neurochemicals. People experienced it as emotion, believing it to be something separate from the operational directive of their bodies. But even bacteria reproduced. There was nothing special about it. The urge didn't justify the action. Life wasn't going anywhere, it was just going on. An endless merry-go-round of consumption and reproduction. Biological drives were neither rational nor moral. Nor were they love. His kids were better served, and better loved, by being left in the peaceful void of non-existence. Even the lowly kutKish were capable of differentiating themselves from bacteria, cockroaches, dogs, rats, and all the rest, by deciding not to follow their primordial instincts. And they had contraception. There was no need to refrain from the act. They could have as much fun as they wished, without it resulting in more fuel for mindless, cyclical hellfire. But few made that choice.

In time, the bond between Ariran and Clara grew stronger. His breathDay came around. To celebrate, they decided to go into town for ice cream. It was the sort of crisp, sunny day that demanded a slow walk along the banks of a nearby river. Half way, they stopped at a bench to relax. Clara smoked a cigarette. Ducks gathered at their feet expectantly.

'Awww, sorry duckies, we've no bread for ya, and I don't think you want this', said Clara, holding up her cigarette.

Sitting shoulder to shoulder, Ariran could feel the warmth from her body. She finished her cigarette, stubbed it out, and put it in a bin adjacent to the bench. Then she offered Ariran a strong mint and sucked one herself. An old man appeared

further up the bank and began throwing crumbled bread into the water. The ducks hurried away toward the feast. Ariran gazed into Clara's eyes. A warm, pulsating ball of golden light rippled through his body. He repressed a strong desire to lean in and steal a kiss. Relationships between patients were strictly forbidden and could result in excommunication. Plus, their friendship was invaluable. Making the wrong move might ruin it. Yet, how could he hold back? Clara clearly enjoyed his company and was always flirting with him.

'You alright Duckie? You look a bit pale. Where've you gone?' she asked him.

'I'm okay', he replied, in a pitch so high it surprised them both. He blushed.

Clara stood up slowly. 'Well ... I guess we'd better move on, Duckie.' She flashed a cheeky grin his way.

'Wait. Come here.' Ariran grabbed her hand and pulled gently.

Clara sat back down. 'What is it, Duckie? Do you want this ice cream or not? The shop will be closed before we get there.'

'No, er, yes, but I want this first.'

'Wha—'

Ariran leant in and kissed her. Clara kissed back. What a kiss! He caressed her neck and ran his hands through her hair. Her tongue tasted of mint and tobacco. It moved with passion, making patterns on Ariran's tongue. She gently licked the roof of his mouth, nibbled his lips, then kissed harder, deeper.

A dog walker passed by. 'Oh gawd, get a room you two', she said, tutting.

The couple giggled, shared another long kiss, and continued their walk. Ariran was exhilarated. Clara, light and dreamy. He bounced as he walked. She seemed to float. This was the person he wanted to spend the rest of his life with, his heart-taste told him.

They made it to the ice cream shop fifteen minutes before it closed. Ariran had a scoop of pistachio and one of cherry. Clara had a small scoop of vanilla. She had diabetes and had to be cautious with her diet.

'Just a little nibble, to get the taste', she said with a cheeky smile.

On the way back, they stopped at the same bench, knowing that once they were back at the community mansion, they would have to keep their love secret.

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14. Razor Blade

Thursday morning, ten o'clock. Ariran approached the door. He looked at the plastic sign fondly, running his fingers over each indented letter. Sofie Speilrein. He knocked.

'Come in.'

'Hi, Sofie.'

'Hello, Ariran. I've moved the chairs. The sun was blinding me in the afternoons.'

'You've a new poster too.'

'You noticed.'

'What's it about?'

'Ha! You should know better by now, Ariran. The patient talks. The psychTech listens. Now, you tell me, what do you see?'

'You never give anything away! Okay, so I see two couples dancing. The men look like clones. Suits, fixed smiles, greased hair. There's a woman dancing on her own to the left. A couple of women in the background dancing with a small child. It all looks very civilized, but they're dancing on the edge of a cliff in the moonlight. The sea looks too calm, it's unnatural. That silhouetted building in the background. It's on another steep cliff. There appears to be no way of getting there. And the facial expressions, they're all a bit strange. It looks like they're pretending to enjoy themselves, but really they're straining to mask an inner despair or anger. The men look especially creepy. All the women's dresses are swirling the same way, they're spinning anticlockwise, but the little girl is different. She's spinning clockwise.'

'Good. You're very perceptive. I've noticed that about the dresses before. There are some things I noticed about your description. The happiness seems fake to you, and the scene implies a hidden danger. Especially the men?'

'Yeah. They look like model citizens, don't they? But I

wouldn't trust them.'

'Okay. And you noted that the child is doing something contrary to the adults by spinning the opposite way?'

'It looks that way, and the two women she's dancing with, they're looking at her, but the girl is looking away toward the cliff edge, toward the sea.'

'Why do you think that is?'

'She's different and she knows it. The adults don't see it, but she wants to get away. Maybe she's concerned about the hidden danger in the scene, or perhaps she hopes to jump off the cliff into the sea. But both her hands are being held either side. She's trapped.'

'Very interesting. Have you ever felt that way?'

'I guess I feel trapped a lot of the time. But especially when I was a kid.'

'Yes. And we've discussed some of the difficult things that you encountered. How did you cope with that feeling?'

'All sorts of ways. When I was quite young, I would rebel. Scream, shout, throw stuff. Not for no reason, just when Mother was being a bitch. It was the only way I could try to get my perspective across.'

'Did it work?'

'No. But it felt good, like I wasn't giving in. Like I was holding on to something precious inside but ...'

'Go on.'

'I guess, I began to lose that feeling. It got crushed out of me.'

'So what did you do then?'

'I suppose I gave up. Decided life wasn't worth the effort. If I couldn't live my way, I wanted out.'

'You're talking about suicide?'

'Yeah ... no. Not at first. I wanted out. I ran away a couple of times. Then I just wished I was dead. Sometimes, I held my breath and hoped to die. Other times, I prayed to the greatGlow to take me in my sleep. The idea of suicide came later.'

'Do you remember the first time you decided you wanted to kill yourself?'

'Yeah, there was a lot going on ...'

***

Aged thirteen, Ariran found himself quite alone. He'd fought violently with a friend, Callum. The small group he'd attached himself to became cold and distant. Callum's doing. Whispering poison in their ears. In skolOpticon, classrooms were arranged in rows of paired desks, but Ariran frequently found himself without company. Disinterested in the petty social rituals of daily life, he found it difficult to spark up new friendships. Instead, he focused on learning, and turned his eye inwards. Yet, all he could see inside was putrid banality. Why did he exist? Why did anybody exist? What was life? There was nobody to discuss these questions with. Introspection was unwelcome at home. Mother was incapable. His elder sister, Tenebray, was in the grip of the raging insanity of puberty. The last thing she wanted to do was sit calmly, think, and talk. She was pushing her boundaries. Grasping for power. Mostly through cruelty. She tormented Ariran at every opportunity, in private. In public, she would act the role of the protective and wise elder.

Ariran wondered if this private torment was punishment for being born. Tenebray had known a home with a resident father for four years. Then Ariran was born. Father only wanted one child, perhaps not even that. The conception occurred following marital rape. Perfectly legal at the time. But the man still blamed Mother for her second pregnancy. He became violent. Week on week, his attacks worsened. When she was four months pregnant, he pushed her down the stairs. As she lay crying with pain, he punched her in the stomach. An attempt to murder the foetus. Ariran often wished he'd succeeded. Then, he wouldn't have existed. He'd have escaped a life of woe, and the constant fear he might become as wild and wicked as Father. Due to the sustained level of violence, Mother managed to get Father removed from the home. He was issued with a restraining order. Tenebray saw it all. Father became monstrous and was lost. Ariran replaced him.

Mother kept Father away for years. When the kids were older, she permitted visitation so as not to foster resentment for denying them contact. A surprisingly wise move. It meant they got to know the real man, instead of harbouring some idealized fantasy of an absent figure as so many kids do. Ariran did conjure a fictional father for use in conversation. A father with serviToil who was not an alcoholic. He constructed the character during stage three skolOpticon, when he realized his previous approach, avoidance, would no longer work; older kids pressed for answers. It wasn't too difficult. The physical characteristics were true, taken from an old photograph. Any detail he was unsure of, he could avoid by saying he was unsure, his parents were no longer together.

Despite knowing his capacity for evil, the kids rarely witnessed the full extent of Father's mood swings. At most, they spent a couple of hours a week with him. But there was one occasion. A rare overnight stay. Both kids were sleeping in Father's bed, he'd nowhere else to put them. They'd taken Iggy with them, their small mongrel dog. Long, white fur. Curly tail. Intelligent and well-behaved. Father had nothing for Iggy to sleep on, so the dog lay on the bare floor at the side of the bed. It was bitterly cold. Father's flat had one usable coal fire. That was in the lounge. The one in his bedroom was full of empty bottles. Poor Iggy shivered and whimpered. After a couple of hours, he could no longer resist the temptation of the warm bed and jumped onto the duvet, waking Father. The man lost his shit instantly. Sat bolt upright. Picked Iggy up. Hurled him across the room. Iggy thumped into the wall with a sickening hollow thud and shrill yelp, then dropped to the floor with a muffled whimper. He spent the rest of the night cowering and shaking near the closed bedroom door.

The kids left first thing in the morning. They tried to creep out, but Father woke. He was seething with anger. Partly because he'd woken sober, but mostly because he'd exposed his inner rage and lack of self-control in front of them. He needed them. Children were the only thing that gave his life shape, context, and any sense of achievement. While he'd

failed on all counts, he'd still succeeded in following that simple, banal instruction driving the activity of all biological life—reproduce. Luckily, Father was in the haze of half-sleep. Tenebray mumbled something about an appointment. Father replied, 'Fucking go then', and the kids made their escape.

It was difficult to tell whether Father's psychotic behaviour was the result of addiction, or if the addiction was a means of escaping a dreadful state of being that preceded it. Ariran thought the latter. Even though he was still young, he lived his own misery too. He had outbursts of anger, soon put down by the swift, calloused hand of Mother. And he was not addicted to anything—yet. If he were to develop an addiction, it would certainly be as a result of his misery and not the cause of it. Plus, Father was generally a better man when merry with drink. More smiles. Less anger. A cheeky sense of humour and a passion for riddles. Ariran looked forward to giving drink a try when he was older. Meanwhile, his only friends were the books he read and little Iggy.

Desperate to make sense of existence, he liked to read anything that might help inform him about life, rather than distract him from it. But nothing he encountered offered a convincing explanation for the whole putrid mess. Little had changed since ancient times. Slavery, hunger, war, injustice, abuse, and corruption were endemic. The ignorant mass of kutKish were still dominated and controlled by power, albeit exercised through law and economics; contemporary chains and whips, in place of iron and leather. MahiThist death camps were scattered, not concentrated. Executions happened quietly, unnoticed. At the foot of multi-storey car parks. In hospital beds and nursing homes. In mould-ridden bedsits and dank back-alleys. In alcohol-drenched despair and drug-induced recklessness. Shadowy, torturous exits, caused by isolation, neglect, and disease. A clandestine inquisition of those who failed to align.

There were no martyrs in Ariran's world because nothing was sacred. On balance, things were worse than ancient times. A proliferation of nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons. Toxic environmental pollution on a scale that

threatened to permanently alter the very concept of health if there were any survivors. There were more people than ever. Hordes crammed into every habitable nook and cranny. Cumulative total suffering was greater than at any time in known history; its exponential increase unavoidable. While they believed otherwise, the kutKish were mostly brute animals disguised in clothes of learned habit and ritual. Many were proud of their idiocy and servitude. Others despised their lives, but pretended otherwise.

Ariran understood none of it. He was alien to his peers, his family, and society. Being alive made no sense and offered inadequate compensation. He wanted out. Television introduced him to the idea of suicide. An episode of a medical drama that Mother watched avidly. A depressed woman took an overdose of painkillers. She died. It was framed as a tragedy, but Ariran was inspired. He realized he wasn't trapped.

One Saturday, he was arguing with Mother. As was often the case, he'd suffered a great injustice and argued his case passionately. She won the debate with her usual tactics—hitting him until he surrendered. The blows weren't so bad. He'd become accustomed to her method of communication. But inside, he discovered a boundless pain. It engulfed his very being, suffocating him. Desperate to escape this intolerable darkness, he found a packet of deMetaMal™ in the kitchen and began eating the tablets one by one until they were gone. The taste was bitter; the promise of a painless future, sweet.

Mother had retired to the couch to read a magazine and rest her palms. She heard the crinkling of the foil as he popped each pill. 'What are you doing?' she asked, without looking up.

'I want to die.'

'You'll make yourself sick.'

'I want to die.'

'Don't be so stupid, you'll make yourself sick.'

'I want to die.'

Mother was right. Ariran was terribly sick. He retired to

the bedroom, naively thinking he'd fall asleep, never to wake. As he lay on the floor, he imagined Mother coming into the room some hours later, once the slop she'd dished out for dinner went cold. She'd shout angrily and tell him to get up, raising her hand ready to strike. When he failed to respond, she'd grit her teeth and slap his lifeless body. Then she'd notice he was pale and still. Finally, she'd realize he was gone for good and not coming back. He tried to picture her weeping over his dead body, but the image of her shrugging and walking away kept popping into mind.

Despite his hopes, he didn't die. Within an hour, he was kneeling before the toilet, vomiting violently. His throat couldn't cope with the volume. Torrents of metallic, acid sick flushed up his nose and out of his nostrils. For this brief moment, Ariran got relief from his inner pain. He became a convulsing ball of biological reaction, pure evolutionary instinct. Flesh, blood, and bone. No thoughts. No mind.

Mother heard him puking. She appeared at his side, supporting his head and stroking his hair as he gasped for breath between each convulsion. Soft. Caring. Supple. Almost mother-like. A disturbing and strange experience. It made Ariran puke even harder. Despite her attempt to care, she didn't call for help. No mediBus. No mediTech. No neighbours. No family. She was frightened. What would people think of her? It would be so embarrassing. Quickly, she worked out that Ariran couldn't have taken more than fourteen tablets. That was all that was left. Most were probably in the yellow and white froth, floating in the toilet. Her instinct for social preservation outweighed any doubts about Ariran dying, or having lasting damage to his health. When the vomiting stopped, she mopped his face with a smelly, damp flannel, and helped him to bed. He slept for seventeen hours straight. Being unconscious for so long was blissful.

After his overdose, Mother pretended like nothing had happened. He was sent off to skolOpticon as usual the following Monday. Even Tenebray didn't know. Years later, on the one occasion he raised it with Mother, she told him that

she thought he'd been pretending. 'I decided to ignore you, like I would if you'd been a naughty dog', she told him, still believing this was a perfectly acceptable thing to have done. At that moment, he understood. To Mother, he was like a pet, a soft toy, or an appendage. Something she possessed to serve her own needs. She was incapable of seeing him as an individual, separate to her. Someone with a unique perspective, with perceptions and feelings that were real and valid.

Ariran began to notice many people treating their children like pets. They talked to them like they were idiots, dismissing nuanced expression as irrelevant and uninteresting. Difficult emotions were categorized using a witless, binary logic: tiredness or hunger. An idiotic and heartless habit that denied the intense depth and richness of feeling a child could have. The poor mites just couldn't verbalize it. And so, adults would respond to their kids in ways that nullified the child's experience. Gradually, through years of such treatment, they turned most of their offspring into dull, insensitive robots just like them.

'She never got you help? Even though you'd attempted suicide?'

'No, Sofie. Not even a check-up.'

'You said you thought this was out of social preservation. Can you say more?'

'All the woman was concerned about was how she appeared to people. Who thought what about whom. From a young age, I'd listened to her conversations intently. Watched her expressions and mannerisms. If she wanted to discuss adult things, she turned her back, and lowered the tone of her voice. Like I couldn't hear if she did that! I could see she was just playing roles. Mother. Friend. Corner-shop gossip. At home, the real person appeared. The violent, manipulative tyrant.'

'Don't we all play roles? Don't you play roles, Ariran?'

'Yeah ... I guess, sort of. I mean, sure, I'm different in different company, there are different protocols of

engagement, but I can't help but bring some of my genuine essence to each interaction. I guess it's why I became something of a loner. Being myself with people was more important than being a fake just to make friends.'

'So you felt you could either be authentic and alone, or fake with company?'

'Yeah. Sort of. I wasn't totally alone. I saw plenty of people. Some seemed to like me. I just had no close friends. People I could call. That sort of thing.'

'So what happened in life after that suicide attempt?'

'I focused on doing well at skolOpticon. I guess I was lucky, sitting on my own meant nobody distracting me, you know, messing about and stuff.'

'What about at home, in your spare time? Did you have friends?'

'Not really. I tried a youth club. A music group. A religious group. I'd just drift in and out, have some fun, but never make real friends. I did a bit of art, but with having to share a room with Mother, I had nowhere to put stuff. Books were the easiest thing to keep, and I could take them with me wherever I went. Outside the house, I spent most of my time in the library.'

'Did you try to harm yourself again? Before you jumped.'

'Well ...'

By the age of fifteen, Ariran was shaving. Owning razors felt like he'd attained manhood. He didn't need to shave often, so his technique was still clumsy. One morning, he accidentally slid the blade sideways across his face. It left two parallel cuts, around half a finger in length. They stung like hell. The blood oozed and oozed. In skolOpticon, he'd started to make new friends. For the first time in years, it felt like he belonged to a group, albeit as a peripheral member. His impressive shaving cut brought welcome attention.

The accident with the razor inspired Ariran. Pain could be his friend. Injury, a badge of honour. A few days after the wound on his face healed, he took his razor, snapped open the plastic, and removed two thin blades. Holding firmly, he began

to write across his wrist. Cutting curves was awkward, so he stuck to straight lines. A style that resembled scripts used by ancient tribes. The pain felt good. Drips of blood brought release more satisfying than tears. He imprinted both wrists with 'suicidal', decorating either side with a hexagram. Afterwards, he sprayed the cuts with aftershave to clean them. That gave an extra hit of pain. He wore long-sleeved jumpers to keep the wounds private. But one day, he knocked his arm against the edge of a desk at skolOpticon.

'Ariran, you're bleeding', said John.

Ariran looked down with horror. Blood was soaking through the cuffs of his white shirt. Instinctively, he pulled back the sleeve to stop any further staining.

John's face froze. 'What's that?' He took Ariran's arm and held it up, so he could read the strange writing on his wrist. 'S-u-i-c-i-d-a-l,' he stuttered, 'suicidal, SUICIDAL!?'

Soon there was a small group standing around.

'Did you do this?' asked John.

'Er, yeah', replied Ariran, nonchalantly.

'What for?'

'Felt like. You should try it.'

'Er, no thanks. It's a bit weird.' John looked Ariran in the eye for a few seconds, like he was trying to figure something out. Then he shrugged and walked away.

A couple of class bullies came to look. They were unnerved. Ariran hadn't intended his wounds to be public but realized they brought some power. He'd proven his ability to overcome basic physical instincts. Not just with random cuts, but with the patience and care to carve and shape words. It terrified the uninitiated. He'd crossed a boundary. Broken from the confines of what was considered normal or acceptable. To others, it made him dangerous and unpredictable. Most importantly, the pain of the cut, the blood, and even the discomfort of the healing period, seemed to bring relief from his mental anguish. It made existence bearable. Cutting brought an honest pain. Sharp. Instant. There was cause and effect. A clear beginning followed by gradual healing to resolution. That was what illness and injury were supposed to

be like. And it was under his control. Quite a contrast to the random, relentless discomfort caused by his chronic conditions. The gnawing emptiness inside. The torment of eczema. The prolonged suffocation of asthma.

Ariran didn't become a prolific cutter. Just every so often. When things became too much. People rarely knew. He would always cut words or shapes instead of simple straight lines. For Ariran, cutting was not a trivial act, nor a cry for help. It was a means of turning the will of nature against itself and, in so doing, expressing rebellion against the imposition of an existence he'd not consented to. In time, he found more socially acceptable ways to self-harm and express himself. Cigarettes and poetry. Drugs and art. Beer and music. There was secret release too. Clothes pegs. Hot candles. Garden canes.

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15. Umbrella

The way his psychTech sessions were shaping up pleased Ariran. He'd been able to talk freely about things he'd never shared. Plus, they were still focusing on his childhood. It made it easier to keep his affair with Clara secret. They were comfortable together. She was real. Natural. Lacking any sign of the fakery that dominated society. No plastic talons. No war paint. No waxy lipstick smeared around her mouth like coagulated blood. Some patients noticed how close they'd grown. They wouldn't cause trouble, they were friends. In fact, they seemed positively enthused to witness genuine love, and the element of rebellion it represented. Still, Ariran worried that Sofie suspected something.

'You seem awfully happy these days, Ariran?'

'Is that allowed, Sofie?'

'Of course. What do you think it is? We could bottle it, make a fortune', she winked.

'Yeah. I guess it's just nice being here. People are friendly. The place is spacious and clean. There's little pretence. It feels real. Like how things should be. I hate it when I go home. It sucks the life out of me.'

'Well, it's good to hear you're happy here. Although, it's important to remember that you'll have to go out there into the world in time. That's why you must keep up your home visits at the weekends. I know it's a long journey. Hopefully, when you finish treatment, you'll be able to begin to take control of your life. Shape it how you want. Now, last time we met, you were talking about how you started cutting yourself. How it felt to be in control compared with some of the conditions you suffered with. Do you remember when that feeling started, the feeling that things were out of control?'

'It always was. My earliest memories include the gnawing itch of eczema. But, I guess, a landmark moment was the

horse. You remember, I told you about when I was in a coma?'

'Yes, but, perhaps I wasn't clear. The horse was outside. It crunched into your life with terrible effect. But it was an external thing. I'm wondering more about any feeling that your body or mind was outside your control.'

'I think it always felt that way. I always felt sore some way. I can't recall a time as a kid when there wasn't something. Some feeling of hotness, redness, itching, or breathlessness. There was one time when I was little, it really frightened me ...'

'What is it, Ariran?' Miss Horne asked.

'I need to go, Miss.'

'You need to go where?'

'Toilet, Miss', replied Ariran, with a wobble in his voice.

'Can't it wait?'

'No, Miss.'

'Okay, but be quick.'

Ariran scurried out of the classroom and down the corridor toward the toilets. Some of his classmates giggled quietly. Being interrogated about the need to perform a basic biological function annoyed Ariran, but he didn't dare protest. He'd had to go much more often since the horse knocked him out the previous year. At least, this time, he'd been given permission. Still, he wasn't sure he'd make it in time and dreaded having an accident. That would mean having to change into something from the emergency clothes basket—a store of garments made up from unclaimed lost property. The items were washed and kept aside for use in case of those little accidents. Things kids do with urine, paint, milk, beans, or shit. The last time Ariran needed emergency clothes, he'd been given a giant pair of grey shorts. So baggy they looked like a dress. Miss Horne had to fix them with a safety pin to stop them falling down. As if pissing your pants wasn't humiliating enough! To add injury to insult, there were no spare underpants. He'd had to go commando, and it was an icy cold day.

With this past humiliation in mind, he hurried on, quickening his pace in desperation. The tiny strides of his pale,

sparrow-like legs made it a lengthy journey. On arrival, he stood in front of one of the low, white urinals and hurriedly unzipped his pants. A cold breeze blew in from the playground entrance, which had no solid door, just an iron gate. Ariran strained but nothing happened. His urethra began to sting horribly. A few seconds later, a slow flow trickled out. To his horror, a rivulet of red dribbled down the white porcelain. In disbelief, he double and triple checked. Yes, the red flow was emerging from his body. Oh boy did hit hurt! His legs were trembling. Agony so intense, he wanted to stop straining, but he couldn't because the pressure in his bladder was too great. After an eternity of suffering, he was done. Gingerly, he tucked himself back into his white cottoCloth underpants. Wiped the tears from his cheeks. Washed the splashes of blood from his hands. Started walking back to the classroom, slowly. He decided the problem required the urgent attention of an adult.

Miss Horne was quaintly old-fashioned. A kindly lady, yet strict with discipline. She always wore the same clothes. A plain, grey, knee-length skirt. Pure wool. Slim, grey cardigan. Crisp, white blouse. Pure silk. Grey, woollen socks pulled up to the knee. Shiny, black shoes with a chunky heel and a large silver buckle. Centuries-old fashion.

The classroom was quiet when he entered, just a faint scratching sound from cheap felt-tip pens. Ariran ignored the curious looks from his classmates. He approached Miss Horne.

'Miss.'

'WHAT IS IT, ARIRAN?' she bellowed.

Ariran turned his back to the class and held one hand to the side of his face to shield his words. 'Miss, Miss ... I-I ... I peed red!'

'Don't be silly. What do you mean red?'

'My pee was red, Miss ... and it hurts.'

'Oh. I see. Are you sure?'

'Yes, Miss.'

Miss Horne looked out of the window. Her stony face drained of what little colour it had. She struggled to process

the information and turned to Ariran to seek more detail. 'Yes, I see. What kind of red?'

'Like blood, Miss.'

'Like blood?'

'Yes, like blood.'

'Well, you do look pale', she said, placing her palm on Ariran's forehead.

When the lesson ended, she took him to see the head thothTech. Ariran sat on a plush leather chair outside the office. Miss Horne went inside to explain the situation. When she emerged, she told him to wait where he was, then scurried back to class. The head thothTech, Ms Smith, beckoned Ariran into her office. She proceeded to question him again in much the same way Miss Horne had done. Ms Smith was as thin as Miss Horne but taller and older. Her shoes were also shiny, black, and had a large metal buckle. Being the head, Ms Smith wore black, not grey. Her skirt was long. Her jacket had shoulder pads. A slender, wrinkled neck rose from an ornate, lace collar, tied with a delicate, black bow. The small, ovoid head that balanced on top, was neatly framed by a bob of greying, black hair.

Once she'd finished questioning him, Ms Smith directed Ariran to wait outside. She swished back into her office with a flap of dusty lavender. He was happy to sit back in the same chair he'd briefly occupied earlier. It was still warm. After a couple of minutes, she swished back out, holding a small card from an index file.

'Well. I guess we'd best call your mother.'

'She's not home, Miss.'

'Your father then?'

'No ... NO ... he, he doesn't live at home.'

'Oh. Well. Let me give your mother a try anyway.'

Ms Smith invited Ariran into her office and asked him to sit. Another comfortable, leather chair; for adults. Not hard, plastic, miniature ones like those in the classrooms; for kids. He hated those chairs. They left sore crease lines on the back of his thighs and made his bottom sweat. And that triggered his eczema.

Ariran sat quietly, swinging his legs back and forth, and wiggling the toes in his shoes. Ms Smith picked up a large, black, plastic telephone and began to dial. This took considerable concentration. The careful selection of the correct hole. Accurate placement of the index finger. Spinning the plastic wheel until a small, metal bar prevented further progress. Letting it spin back to its original position. Then, selecting the next number in the sequence.

The sound of clicking and whirring sent a tingling sensation up Ariran's neck, and around the back and top of his head. A strange, effervescent sensation. Incredibly pleasant. It arose for the most innocuous reasons. He'd tried to describe it to Mother. She looked at him as though he were an oddball. She often did that. For the next twenty years, he would think he was the only person in the world who'd ever felt that fuzzy feeling.

'No answer', declared Ms Smith. She glanced at her watch. 'Well, I guess you'd better stay with me until the end of the day. I can speak to your mother when she comes to collect you.'

Ariran nodded.

'Do you feel sick in your belly?'

Ariran shook his head and pointed to his groin, 'It hurts'.

Ms Smith handed Ariran a pen and some paper to doodle on. He didn't feel like drawing but enjoyed holding the pen. It had a clear plastic barrel. Hexagonal. He rolled it between his finger and thumb, feeling each surface, pausing to run a finger along the indented, gold writing. After counting all six sides, he started over again from one. This kept him occupied for much longer than would be considered normal for a boy of his age, or of any age for that matter.

While toying with the pen, Ariran reflected on how Miss Horne and Ms Smith looked like witches. At least very similar to those he once saw in a film. Poor women who were tortured and killed. One was crushed to death. Former friends and neighbours tied her to stakes in the ground. Then, they placed a large wooden door on her body and piled large stones on top, one at a time. She screamed until she was dead. He

recalled the sadistic pleasure the mob took in the woman's agony. They seemed disappointed when she finally died. It wasn't the sort of film a five-year-old should have watched. Mother was out; Tenebray was babysitting. She tried to send him to bed. He pointed out that she was too young to watch it too. Mother would be cross. They made a pact. Afterwards, Ariran wished he hadn't bothered. He couldn't get the cruelty out of his head and was desperate to figure out why it happened. He concluded that people had a passionate hatred for anything they were unable to understand or control. Like magic. Or herbal medicine. First they mock, then they attack, then they kill. Even Mother did the first two. He could easily imagine her doing the third. Name-calling might not be a direct physical injury, but it hurt a lot, and it paved the way to slaughter.

Ms Smith looked at the boy sitting quietly, rolling the pen over and over between his fingers. She wondered if he might be a little simple.

The skolOpticon bell rang, signalling the end of the day. By magic, it always rang at the same time. Now Ariran saw the cause. Ms Smith. Without prompting, she'd risen from her desk at precisely four o'clock. Walked over to a black, circular protrusion on the wall. Pressed the fingertip-sized, white button at the centre. From the top of the button surround, a thin pipe ran up to the ceiling. It made its way past the light fitting and through a small hole in the wall above the doorway. Out in the corridor, it split and spread like tendrils, reaching every nook and cranny in the skolOpticon. Each extension terminated in a bulbous grey bell.

Ms Smith walked Ariran out to the yard, where parents collected their children. She held his hand gently. It was a comforting grip, not like the iron clamp of Mother's hand. Suddenly, he was struck by how kind she'd been. How comfortable he felt in her company. He wondered if she had children of her own. Maybe she'd be a better mum than the one he had. She could adopt him. Ariran saw Mother approaching. He felt guilty but didn't know why.

Mother was frowning and shaking her head. ‘Has he been

naughty?' she asked in a tone devoid of curiosity.

'No, no, not at all. He hasn't been well, actually', replied Ms Smith, authoritatively, before proceeding to explain the full situation.

'Blood!' Mother exclaimed. 'Don't be ridiculous.'

She leant down toward Ariran with a look that was both mocking and incredulous.

'Are you making up stories?'

'It's red and it hurts!' he snapped back, squeezing his eyes shut until the urge to cry went away. He hated Mother when she was like this. And she often was. It was easy to imagine her piling stones onto a witch, smirking like an idiot. Why could she never be genuine, kind, and concerned like Ms Smith?

Ms Smith suggested taking him to see a mediTech as soon as possible. Mother was less certain. She was convinced, based on her own ignorant presumptions, that there was nothing wrong with him. However, as a woman with a simple mind, she gave weight to the opinion of anybody she perceived as an authority figure. Reluctantly, she agreed with Ms Smith's recommendation.

The mediTech was a ten-minute walk from the skolOpticon. If they moved fast, they could get there an hour before closing. Mother walked at some pace, dragging Ariran by his arm. She blushed upon approaching reception, embarrassed about asking for help with a problem she thought didn't exist.

'There's probably nothing wrong with him,' she spluttered, 'but the *head thothTech* said it was better to get it checked. I wouldn't ordinarily have bothered ... I'm sure he's fine but the *head thothTech* said ... and besides I'm in serviToil all day tomorrow, I wouldn't be able to bring him ... and the *head thothTech* seemed concerned. I really need him in skolOpticon tomorrow, I have serviToil.'

In the mediTech's office, Ariran was lifted onto a brown, leather examination table. Far too high and narrow for a person to lie on safely. While perched precariously, he was instructed to remove his pants and underpants. The mediTech

held Ariran's Y-fronts up to the window, in full view of the road outside. There was a red stain on the front. Next, he told Ariran to lie back. Rough, hairy hands pressed various parts of his belly, then lifted and examined his penis.

'Pyelonephritis', declared the mediTech. 'A kidney infection.'

'Oh ... how did he make that happen?' Mother blushed.

'Well, it isn't uncommon in young people. You do encourage him to wash his genitals thoroughly, don't you?'

'Well, I don't know much about boys—'

'Nonsense.' A look of disbelief flashed across the mediTech's face. Quickly, he regained his composure. 'Well, there's not a great deal to it. A little soap and warm water. Just as you would wash anything else. Nothing like as complex as women's genitals. For hygiene at least. Although it can be a little trickier to get inside a penis, but you don't need to worry about that for washing. Still, I can sort this out pretty quickly.'

Mother blushed again.

The mediTech ambled over to an old, oak chest of drawers. After rummaging through the first two, he found what he was looking for in the third and slammed it shut triumphantly. A narrow, metal tube with a top that opened and closed like an umbrella. Before Ariran could protest, the tube was shoved down the middle of his penis. The umbrella was opened and withdrawn. Ariran squirmed in outrageous pain. He began to cry.

'Is this really necessary?' Mother asked with a feeble quiver.

'Best to get it sorted', commanded the mediTech, evading the question. Then he changed the subject. 'This is an interesting set of birthmarks.'

'What?'

'On his cheek here. Five little marks. Very subtle. They almost look—'

'Oh, I hadn't really noticed them before', said Mother dismissively. 'It's only his skin, you know what I mean?'

Another look of disbelief flashed across the mediTech's

face. Again, he quickly refocused on what he was doing. The umbrella had scraped about a thumbnail's worth of a thick yellow pus from inside Ariran. It was tainted with blood and smelt awful. The mediTech took it away and came back with a lollipop. 'That's for you, boy. You've been very good.'

Ariran took the lollipop. He focused his full attention on it to distract himself from the trauma. The wrapper was red with yellow dots. It made a sticky, crinkling noise as he peeled it away. The candy was red, slightly opaque, and shaped like a whistle. It tasted vaguely similar to strawberries. The mediTech reunited him with his clothes and lifted him down off the table.

Mother was unusually quiet on the way home. She didn't even gossip with the pharmaTech when they collected Ariran's antibiotics. Once home, she ran a bath. He was told to get washed and put his pyjamas on. The blood-stained underwear was taken away and hidden under a towel in the washing basket.

Ariran sat in two inches of lukewarm water, splashing it against the sides of the grey plastic bath. He pretended it was the sea crashing against a tall cliff. A long, thin, horizontal mirror ran along the wall above the bath. It was fascinating. You could only ever see a thin strip of your face or body at any one time. Never the whole self. After his bath, he was presented with a plate of beans on hot buttery toast and gobbled it down.

The next morning, he was very sore. When he peed, the flow was better. Less blood. Still, he didn't feel like going to skolOpticon. Mother told him he must. It was her house. She made the rules.

Over the following days, Ariran's urine gradually returned to its normal colour. The pain subsided. He knelt at the side of his bed, resting his elbows on the edge of a grey, woollen blanket. With clasped hands, he closed his eyes and prayed to the greatGlow with all his heart. 'Oh greatGlow, I don't think I've been that much of a naughty boy, but if you have to hurt me, please can you leave my insides and my willy alone? Maybe you could give me a broken leg or cut arm instead? No

more red pee. Please. And no more mediTechs with little metal umbrellas. I promise to be good. Thank you.'

'That sounds horrific, Ariran. Did you have any more trouble with your waterworks?' asked Sofie.

'Nothing like that. I still don't understand it. But I remember it so vividly. Being in that toilet when the blood first came out. I can see the bricks. Varnished terracotta. The floor had matching terracotta tiles, the ones with ripples in for grip. Still slippy though. That smell of urinals. Stale piss and cheap bleach. The cold wind. It felt so unreal, yet more real than anything.'

'Yes, it sounds frightening for a young boy. I'm not sure a mediTech would do what he did these days either. What I really picked up on was the difficulty with your mother. It sounds like she struggled to understand you?'

'Yeah. Well, I'm not sure she struggled, that would imply she tried. You know, Sofie, I don't know what to do with most of my memories. She was so, odd. Angry. But ... it was like she was stupid more than anything. Like she had no idea what she was doing or how she made me feel. I have all these memories from when I was young. Traumatic moments. I mean, some things seemed innocuous, they didn't need to be unpleasant. She could have been so different. My life could have been so much better. But every moment of every day was overshadowed with a potential eruption. It was like living with a volcano. There was this time with an ice cream at the fair, she—'

'Sorry to interrupt, Ariran. I want to hear all about it, but time's up. Come and tell me next time.'

16. Ice Cream

The fairground baked in the hot sun. Bright and colourful. Carnival week. A celebration for the sake of celebration. Fun for fun's sake. Groups of kids played noisily. Chattering. Laughing. Smiling. Ariran wanted to be like them—excited and enthusiastic—but he was miserable and angry. His skin was sweaty, prickling in the heat. Tingling. Itching.

The torturous itching from eczema is not like an ordinary itch. The eczema itch is beneath the surface. Unreachable. Rarely alleviated by scratching which often makes things worse. But the demonic irritation is impossible to ignore. Once Ariran started to scratch, and he always did, he had to scratch hard, long, and deep. First, he knocked the tops off the tiny, raised bumps on the surface of his skin. Clear lymph oozed out. Next, he tore at the wounds, opening them up further. The top layer of skin got hacked away, like it had been rubbed with a cheese grater. Trickles of blood mingled with the lymph. Occasionally, he felt a little relief at this stage. Typically, there was still intense irritation causing him to continue digging into his flesh, trapping sticky blood and flakes of skin under his fingernails. Sufficient deep scratching would eventually cause enough pain to overwhelm the itching. The resulting wounds formed scabs, but they would begin to itch long before they were fully healed.

Ariran was suffering with prickly heat too. Another form of skin torture. Its frustrating sensation resembled a nettle's sharp kiss, moments before the stings fully develop. Waves of discomfort rippled over his body, like the first flames licking the skin of the condemned. He walked in a sulk, idling a couple of paces behind Mother and Tenebray, yearning for distraction from the anguish and affliction. There was plenty to see. Kids in fancy dress. Balloons. Colourful decorations. Games. Fast-moving rides. Nothing interested him. Then he

spied an ice cream van, vending cool delights.

'Ice creeeaaam, ice cream, ice cream', sang Ariran. He grabbed Mother's hand and yanked on it.

Mother looked over to the van. A young mum handed lollies down to her kids. They were all smiling. Mother looked worried. Her purse was light. Being a single parent wasn't easy. Housing. Bills. Clothes. Shoes. Bus fares. Food. Medicine. And the damned kids just kept growing out of things. Anything to do with money made her anxious. And everything did have something to do with money, so she was always on edge. Ariran could sense her mood. He knew she was now thinking that coming to the fair was a bad idea. Rides were pricier than anticipated. Now there were other demands on her purse. Things an intelligent woman would have foreseen. Could a young mother walk past an ice cream van, on a hot summer's day, and refuse her kids a treat? It seemed immoral. Not what other mothers would do. She fumbled with her open purse, scratching among the coins.

'Okay kids, do you want ice cream?'

'Yeaaah!' Ariran squealed.

'Sure do', agreed Tenebray.

The promise of a lump of cold fat, blended with frozen sugar, distracted Ariran momentarily from the torturous sensations in his skin. He watched the soft ice-cream pump out from the condensation-dappled, metal nozzle. The vendor artistically created a pointy curl before thrusting a chocolate stick into the side. He finished up with a drizzle of dyed-red sugar sauce, applied with a flick of the wrist. Tenebray took the first one. She began to slurp the dribbles of syrup before they made their way over the edge of the cone. The second ice cream made its way down to Ariran. He wasn't as adept at licking as Tenebray. Soon, there were dribbles of red sauce and melted ice cream on the back of his hand. Instinctively, he turned his hand toward his mouth to lick it. Such a poorly considered plan, executed in the naivety of youth. A child's mistake. Not a sin. As his tongue reached the back of his hand, he realized he'd tipped the cone too far. Out dropped the ice cream. The whole creamy blob rolled down his front and

landed on the floor with a schlop! No longer a cool sugary treat. Now it looked like bleached cat diarrhoea.

Ariran examined the mess. He briefly considered reaching down to scoop it up, but flies were already on the scene. Wisely, Tenebray kept some yards away. She pretended not to have noticed and hurriedly gobbled her ice cream down, fearing she might be asked to share it. Mother froze. She stared at the blob, then at Ariran. He felt a chasm open up inside. This wasn't simply a dropped ice cream. It wasn't just a messed up t-shirt. It was a tragedy. His life in a nutshell. Mother didn't have the money to buy a replacement. She'd be mad. Mad about the waste. Mad at how he'd ruined a good day out. When they got home, she'd scald and slap him. His hands trembled at the thought. Brazenly unjust.

After a few seconds, his mouth opened so wide it forced his eyes shut. A sound emerged. So loud and shrill, it threatened to crack the sky. A primal expression of guttural rage against the greatGlow. Against being. Ariran's whole body was overcome with the force of an energy so immense, it seemed he was channelling it from the depths of the earth. He morphed into a conduit for cosmic protest against the perpetual absurdity and cruelty of existence. The tremor in his hands worsened and spread. His legs wobbled. Then his entire body quaked. He had to do something before he shattered into tiny pieces, so he stomped his feet and shook his arms with rage. It looked like an electrocution.

Had the episode happened at home, or somewhere with few people, Mother would have reacted as she usually did. By mocking and striking him. However, this was a busy fairground. Several dozen pairs of eyes were watching. Mother pleaded desperately, 'It's only an ice cream, you can have a choc-ice from the freezer when we get home.' But her temper was short. She snapped, barely after finishing the sentence.

Mother's sudden rush of anger occurred numerous times each week. Sometimes, several times a day. Her face would become tense. Hard. Deep crimson. She'd clench her teeth. Curl her hands into taut, sinuous claws. Violence followed.

This day, he felt her powerful bony hand on his upper arm, partially lifting him off the ground. It bruised him instantly. His skin was crawling, prickling, and itching. His eyes stung with tears. A choking sob replaced his desperate wailing. The grip on his arm tightened, cutting off the blood flow. She held her free arm up, threatening a slap. Shook him aggressively. Commanded him to stop crying. Her words were hot and thin, shooting out from taut lips. 'Shut up, ssShHUT uuuUUUP! SHUT UP!'

Dozens of eyes were on her now. She was crushed with shame. Not for her behaviour, but for having such an unhappy child in her possession. Her only aim was to stop the noise he was making. She didn't perceive it as an expression of suffering or a cry for help. If she had, she would have comforted him. To her, it was an annoyance and embarrassment. It was causing her pain, and she wanted it to cease. Ariran knew from experience that he was now at threat of further violence. If he didn't quieten down, he'd be beaten. Try as he might, he couldn't contain his emotions. On this occasion, he got lucky. His asthma struck. He ran out of air. Rivers of tears flowed from his eyes and down his red, itchy cheeks. But no more sound came from his open mouth. It was still agape but only as a silent scream.

As he began turning blue, Mother erupted with sadistic laughter. 'Look at you', she mocked. 'You're making a fool of yourself in front of all these people, you silly little boy.'

The intense experience of absurd injustice and banal suffering led Ariran to realize, at the tender age of six, that he had an intense dislike for the greatGlow. But he kept it secret. He'd learned he was supposed to think otherwise.

Weekend skolOpticon taught about the greatGlow. Scriptures glorifying the entity were made digestible for children using cartoons. Sometimes, the greatGlow was portrayed as an elderly eunuch. Two fried-egg breasts. A pointed, white beard. Large eyelashes. Other times, more abstract depictions were presented. A cloud-like formation. A blob, emanating rays like the sun. A lobster claw. The voice of an owl in the darkness. It was obvious nobody knew what it

was.

The collected scriptures of the greatGlow were published in a large book called The Writings of The Rays. Often shortened to The Rays. A disturbing and bloodthirsty tome. Persecution. Murder. Torture. Hunger. Sacrifice. Slavery. The greatGlow was wild and unkind. Yet, the doctrine of The Rays repeatedly stated that it was loving and caring. Such love would see people and animals drowned to death. Cities smashed and burned. The most faithful kutKish eaten alive by all kinds of beasts. Ariran was not surprised that the greatGlow had created eczema and prickly heat. Nor that it made him drop his ice cream. He detested teachings suggesting that violence and hatred were necessary signs of love and compassion—a cognitive dissonance the kutKish called faith. They were told not to try to understand the greatGlow. They were only meant to obey. Its workings were mysterious, not reasonable. So that's what they did. Ariran didn't understand any of it. Not the texts. Not the teachings. Least of all, why so few others saw anything amiss. He hadn't bothered with prayer since his kidney infection, but he didn't dare tell Mother.

'Do you have faith now, Ariran?' asked Sofie.

'I guess so, but not for any religious icon.'

'What do you have faith in?'

'Myself. I mean, I can't really trust anything. Not rationally. You might not exist, Sofie. I might be hallucinating. On the other hand, you might exist, but you could be malevolent; some entity created to keep me in this hell world. But, ultimately, I decide. I have faith in my decision to carry on. To be a being. To act as though you are real.'

'I see. I get what you're saying. I'm glad you're telling me this, but, you know, it hurts a little when you suggest I might not be real. I guess that's how your mother made you feel?'

'Yeah. I don't experience you as unreal. Far from it. But Mother ... and not just her. Perhaps reality is just a feeling. A place or relationship where I can be fully myself, fully seen.'

'And it sounds like you haven't had much of that?'

'No. No, I haven't. I do here. I have it in these sessions. I

have it in the community. People listen. They have empathic intelligence and understanding. I don't have to hide anything about myself. I have proper friendship here.'

'What about romance? Did you have any girlfriends in the past?'

'Yeah, a few. Nothing serious or long-term though.'

'Sex?'

'Not quite. Fumbles, groping, grinding, hand-jobs, fingering, but never what I really desired. Sensual, naked sex. I had nowhere to take a girl. Not that I ever found anyone I really connected with.'

'No. It must have been difficult being on guard all the time. Feeling ashamed of your home life. Wanting to keep it hidden.'

'Yeah. I didn't really know that I was hiding part of myself. It just felt like this fish tank kind of feeling. Like I was always in a bubble, separating me from other people.'

'And you didn't want to be?'

'No ... yeah, I guess it was safer that way, I wanted real connection, but I didn't want the danger that came with it. It's not the same for everyone. Vulnerability. Some people don't have the sort of things in their background that I had. Some have worse, of course. But others have nothing like it. They don't need to worry so much about being spontaneous. They can invite people to their houses when they wish. They can talk about their parents with pride. They can talk to their parents without fear. They have a freedom they will never really appreciate because it's normal and natural for them.'

'Yes, I see your point. It's that time again, so we'll have to finish there.'

'Okay. I'll see you next session, Sofie. Thanks.'

17. Mel

Marjorie wheeled the tea trolley into the main lounge. A suicide survivor in her mid-fifties. Dressed like she was still in her teens. Short skirt; black and white blocks. White, knee-length boots. Beehive hair. A prolific smoker. She cleared her throat with a hacking cough before she spoke, 'Tea's up!'

Clara fetched two cups of tea. White, no sugar. 'Here you go, Ari. A nice evening cuppa. Fancy a game?'

'Sure.'

'And there we are', said Marjorie, passing the box to Ariran.

'Thanks, Marj. How did you know?'

'You two play every night. I can see that look in your eyes. You're like an old married couple.'

'We're just friends. We've a lot in common, that's all. Don't we, Clara?'

'That's right.' She winked at Marjorie.

'Got something in your eye?' asked Marjorie, winking back. 'I'm going to put a record on. Any requests? Nothing romantic, of course. Something friendly perhaps?'

'Whatever you decide is okay with me, Marj,' said Ariran.

'Yeah. But nothing too lively, it'll be bedtime soon', added Clara.

They began setting the game up. Marjorie idled over to the stereo and began to thumb through a pile of LPs. A faint crackle. Music began to play.

Clara leaned in toward Ariran and whispered, 'Want to lay a bet, make it interesting?'

'I'm not much of a gambling man. What did you have in mind?' Ariran whispered back.

'I'll come to your room later. Loser strips.'

'Loser strips and drops to their knees.'

'Why would they do that?'

'To please their master.'

'If you mean mistress, you're on.'

'What are you two plotting over there?' asked Marjorie.

'Nothing, Marj. Great choice of music. It's one of my favourites.' Clara replied.

Not long after their first kiss, Ariran was moved from a four-bed, shared room, to one with only two beds. One was unoccupied. A new patient was lined up for admission. Until he arrived, Ariran had the room to himself. The first time Clara came was a surprise. A dream come true. She continued using the same simple plan. Once everyone had gone to bed, she tiptoed out of her shared room, pretending to be going to the toilet. If the night paliTech caught her, she'd say she couldn't sleep. Needed to stretch her legs. Have a cigarette. But she reached him without hitch on most attempts. He was having the happiest time of his life.

Next morning, Ariran bounced into Sofie's office with a grin.

'I'm worried about you, Ariran.'

'Oh?'

'Patients aren't normally this happy.'

'It's because you're so talented, Sofie.'

'Ha. Flattery will get you everywhere. But seriously, can you tell me more about your mood?'

'I just feel good. I'm happy here. Having my own room is cool too.'

'Ah yes. You're on your own for the moment, aren't you?'

'Yeah.'

'I suppose that's a new experience for you. Having your own space?'

'Not entirely. I had my own room at Mother's once Tenebray moved out. But it wasn't as good as this. I mean, Mother was still there. There was always a danger she would come into the room without notice.'

'Didn't she knock?'

'You've got to be kidding. I tried to protest, but she said it was her house, she could do what she liked.'

'I see.'

'The only time I felt safely alone was after she went to bed.

I often stayed up late to enjoy that feeling.'

'Staying up late isn't good for you though, is it?'

'I don't know. It's who I am now. A night owl.'

'Do you stay up late here?'

'No, no. Now and then I ... er, read for a while. But, compared to home ... I don't stay up until three in the morning watching weird movies.'

'Weird movies?'

'Yeah. Not porno or anything. Arthouse stuff. I like dreamy movies. Scenes that toy with perception, twisting reality. They do tend to have sex and nudity in, but it's intrinsic to life, isn't it? How could a true artist leave it out? If it's not directly present, it's always there as a simmering subconscious element. Actually, I had a bit of a weird dream last night.'

'What was that about?'

'Mel.'

'Who's Mel?'

'An ex. Sort of. She was a bit odd. Maybe it was me ...'

Ariran flicked back his thick mop of white hair, finished the last of his beer and vodka, and joined his friends. They left the local park and ambled towards the party. The booming beat of dance music was faintly audible from the end of the long driveway. It got louder with each step. Flashing colours spilled through gaps in the metal window shutters. A few older lads were milling around by the door. Ariran's group filed past and went inside.

Fake smoke and disco lights. They'd arrived unfashionably early. The room was almost empty. In the far corner, a few girls were sat in a huddle, giggling. Mel was there. Ariran's girlfriend. They'd started up an awkward relationship several weeks earlier. She was of eriNis origin. Piercing green eyes. Pale and freckled. Plaited, rusty-red hair. Her slim body shimmied as she waved and smiled. Ariran picked up his bottle of beer and crossed the dance floor to talk to her. As he staggered through the lights and smoke, he realized he might have drunk too much already. Mel greeted him with an air kiss and mumbled something in his ear. Ariran mumbled

something back, but he wasn't sure what. He couldn't really hear over the music. Besides, he had no idea how to talk to girls, he just wanted to fuck.

Mel was especially difficult to converse with. She didn't get out much and had few interests. Just entrainment and studying The Rays. Beyond whatever was popular on the radio, she knew nothing of modern music. She disliked electric guitars. Hated football. Theatre bored her. Art was for kids. Non-religious poetry and philosophy was blasphemous. And despite an overzealous fetish for kissing, she wasn't very good at it. Mel also discouraged wandering hands. Truth is, the two of them had very little in common.

After a short talk about nothing, Ariran went outside for a cigarette. The flame from his lighter cast a warm, yellow glow across his face. The tobacco crackled as he sucked in the smoke. He found a white, railed fence nearby and perched on top. A clear night. Thin crescent moon. A handful of stars shimmered overhead in defiance of the city's light pollution. Smoke rings drifted from his mouth, dissolving in the melancholy darkness. A golden moment alone. Time to reflect. The hollowness of his heart preoccupied his thoughts. He wanted to love and be loved. To touch and be touched. Mel was a passing fancy, there was no real connection there. He'd put in great effort trying to get inside her knickers. Probably a waste of energy. Without emotional connection, he found it difficult to get hard. She was a beauty though.

He sparked up another cigarette. Continued ruminating. The stars began to spin. A glitch in time. He caught the first load of vomit in his mouth and swallowed it. Soon, he was doubled over, one arm holding the fence he'd been sat on. He puked hard. Before long, he was laying on the ground, groaning. Mel appeared. She crouched down next to him. Asked if he needed help. Perhaps a glass of water. She sounded angry. Ariran groaned with shame and rolled over. Insulted, she stormed back into the party, swearing in a harsh eriNis accent. He hadn't heard her speak like that before. It made her even more attractive.

Twenty minutes passed. Ariran lay on the ground next to

his puddle of sick. A couple of older lads approached. They kicked his ribs and told him to get inside. A poliTech car was approaching. They didn't want the party being shut down due to a pisshead like him. After being dragged to his feet, he staggered into the building, quickly finding the toilet. Suddenly, he was gripped with fear. Could it be the time-poliTech? Was the swirling of the stars a signal his consciousness had transgressed mandated linear time, again? He found an empty cubicle and locked himself inside. Soon, he was kneeling in a puddle of piss, head over the toilet, puking his guts up. It hadn't been flushed for a while. There were lumps of shit clinging to the sides. Some of it stuck to his flailing hair. His stomach emptied. After dry-retching for a couple of minutes, he fell asleep on the floor.

When he awoke, he found that he'd puked again. Mostly down his shirt. He scraped off as much as he could and headed out into the night. A fireBus and a mediBus were parked outside. One of the older lads had tried to climb a metal fence on the edge of the grounds. The type that had spear-like projections at the top. He'd slipped and impaled his thigh. Even with the help of friends, he was unable to lift himself off. They were holding his weight while the fireTechs tried to free him. Drink helped them see the funny side; they couldn't stop laughing. The injured lad screamed the whole time. The image of Doug Havishan lying dead flickered into Ariran's mind. The cackling, twisted face of Kuu Evans. Doug didn't scream. He didn't get chance.

Ariran was glad for the drama outside the party, it was an opportunity to slink off into the darkness, unseen. He paused at the end of the driveway, under a dim orange streetlamp, and lit a cigarette. All his money was spent and he had a long walk home. As he glanced around, he spied shadows moving under a nearby tree. It was Mel. She was with a young girl. They were snogging passionately. And Mel allowed the girl's hands to wander! One completely disappeared down the front of her jeans. The girl devoured her neck like a vampire. Mel moaned with delight. Ariran was glued to the spot. For a moment, they looked like two thick-bodied snakes, writhing in

lethal competition. Mel looked up and saw him. Pathetic. Alone. Drenched in vomit and piss. She cackled. A loud, dirty laugh. Like a wild beast. It morphed into a low growl, then a series of loud grunts. Her legs began to twitch and tremble.

'And that, Sofie, was the end of my short relationship with Mel.'

'Quite a dream, Ariran!'

'Oh, no, that was what actually happened. In real life. The dream wasn't so bad. We just fucked. It was okay.'

'I see. How did you feel after that night, after seeing your girlfriend with the other girl?'

'Like a failure. Up to that point, she'd been my best opportunity to get laid. I was disappointed, but mostly relieved.'

'Disappointed you didn't have sex?'

'Yeah.'

'But you didn't really love her.'

'Love? There wasn't even affection really. A bit of lust. I don't know what she saw in me either.'

'Did you move on? Try to court someone else?'

'No. That weekend was just before my suicide attempt. The one when I jumped from the window. Even when I'd recovered enough mobility, I just didn't get out again.'

'I see. What do you think would have happened if it had been you under the tree with Mel?'

'She would never have done that with me.'

'Imagine she did. And you weren't drunk and covered in vomit.'

'We would've fucked, I guess.'

'Yeah, I mean, after the weekend. Do you think you'd still have tried to kill yourself?'

'Hard to say. I don't think it was a reaction to what happened with Mel. I'd been down on life for a long time. It was the thought of being abandoned to the real world, once skolOpticon ended, that was the thing that really filled me with dread.'

'Abandoned?'

'Not by any particular person. By fate. By all of them, I suppose. In those days, there was always someone to hang out with, somewhere to go and be around people. Football in the park, parties, wandering aimlessly and talking nonsense. There were literally hundreds of people I could say hello to or have a short chat with. That sociability always had a spaciousness, an adventurous sort of feeling. Like anything was possible. I knew it was coming to an end. I saw what the world did to people after just a few years of serviToil.'

'Maybe not everyone experiences that, it depends what you do, but it does seem to suck the life out of plenty of people, for sure. So, Mel was your last attempt at a relationship with a woman?'

'Er ...'

'Still a virgin?'

'Well ...'

'No matter. Plenty of time for that. I know there's pressure, external and internal, but you're still very young. What concerns me more, is that it sounds like you've not really had a good experience with a romantic relationship, something that could become sexual?'

'Well, actually, y-er ... nope. No. But I feel very hopeful. You know. For the future.'

'You're not down on women?'

'I'd like to be!'

'Ariran!'

'Sorry, no. Obviously, you know I'm no fan of Mother, or my sister, but I like women, when they aren't bitches. I'm not transforming into some twisted misogynist or gynophobe, if that's what you mean, despite what I did in my dream.'

'When they aren't bitches?'

'Yeah, okay, I get it.'

'So, what happened in your dream?'

'I had sex with Mel. In front of another woman. But I didn't let Mel come. Then I had sex with the woman, in front of Mel. We both came buckets. Mel was pissed off. It was like the roles were reversed, but I didn't cackle or behave horribly like she did. I was glad she felt bad though. That cackling. I'll never

forget how animalistic it was.'

'And you don't want to be an animal?'

'No. I mean, we're animals, aren't we? Our passions are animalistic, but they don't need to be nasty. We have the capacity to shape them.'

'So, it sounds like you feel letting the animal side free is okay, so long as there's something, how shall I put it ... higher, in control?'

'I suppose. Maybe, more that it's conscious rather than unconscious.'

'Okay, I think I know what you mean. It seems like a breakthrough dream. I'd expect that sort of thing to occur when a new relationship had begun, but perhaps it's a metaphor. Either way, it seems you've healed that hurtful moment. Maybe we can continue talking about your feelings around intimate relationships next time?'

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18. ToothTech

Clara plonked her tray onto the table. She sat opposite Ariran. Homemade lasagne, sprinkled with fresh cheese.

'Hey, yours looks bigger than mine', said Clara.

'I'm a growing man', Ariran replied. 'How was your day?'

'Not great. But I'm looking forward to this evening. Want another game?'

'Sure. You're a glutton for punishment.'

'I'll beat you one day, you'll see.' Clara began to fondle Ariran's leg with her foot. He tried to move, but the table was crammed. People either side of him. Legs everywhere. Her toes slid up between his knees toward his thighs. Feeling his crotch twitch, he raised his eyebrows as a plea for her to stop. She just grinned. He couldn't say anything for fear of spilling their secret. Her foot moved up and down. Slowly. Gently. He could feel the energy building. His belly felt tight. His heart began to pound. She stopped. Put her foot down. Ate her dinner. Then she got up to leave. 'I'll see you later then. I feel lucky,' she said, smiling.

Ariran was late for workshop the next morning. He apologized. Explained he'd not slept well. It was difficult to hide his joy, but he tried to keep the smiles to a minimum. After workshop, he made his way to Sofie's office for his usual session. He felt guilty. She was great to talk to. He trusted her. Keeping Clara secret was a sort of betrayal. But he was in love. He couldn't risk it. It was too precious.

'Ariran. Come in, sit down. How's your day been so far?'

'Well. Not bad. I was a little late for workshop, but everyone was okay about it.'

'What happened?'

'Just overslept. I didn't sleep so well. Then, when I finally fell asleep, I went to that faraway place from where it's hard to get back into your body.'

'Something on your mind?'

'Not really. Lots of things, I suppose.'

'I wonder if it had to do with the things we talked about last time. About girlfriends and close physical relations.'

'No ... I don't think so.'

'Well. I'd like you to go back in time a little. Can you remember when you first started having the desire for a close physical relationship? When you first wanted to get laid, as you put it?'

'Er. I think I'd always had a desire for close contact. Romance. I was obsessed as a child. Never a week went by when I didn't have a girlfriend. Whatever that meant. You know, just hanging out and the odd peck on the cheek. Pretending to be an adult, I guess. And I always got loads of valentines cards, but then I sent quite a few as well. Seems a bit silly looking back.'

'You were a kid, it's fine.'

'Yeah. I could be a kid at school. Home never felt safe enough to be silly. To let go.'

'That must have been tough. But it's good you had some outlet for play. It sounds like school was a happy place?'

'It was okay. There were tough times, but I looked forward to going. It was better than being at home.'

'So when did you start to feel pretend relationships weren't enough?'

'Around thirteen-ish, I was a late developer. It was around then I started wanting sex. But ... it felt a bit repulsive. You know. The fluids.'

'When you started to masturbate?'

'Yeah.' Ariran blushed. 'I, er, there was this time, it's hard ...'

'Okay, take your time. It sounds important. You know this is all confidential.'

'Uh huh. Well. It was the first time. I was masturbating. I'd been doing it for years. Touching myself. Even before I knew what I was really doing. But this time I ejaculated. First time. It took me by surprise. I still didn't have any hairs down there, you know. And I made a mess on the carpet. But when I saw

the stuff and smelled it, I started getting flashbacks. Images. Almost like watching a video. It was of this visit to the toothTech. I was in the treatment chair ...'

The dental nurse was nearby. Long, brown hair, swept back with a blue hairband. Sensible navy-blue shoes. Black trousers. A smart, blue tunic, decorated with white piping. Perfume. A mellow, floral scent. Faint wafts of dissent against the pervasive odour of harsh disinfectant and minty mouthwash. Her body language was odd. An uneasiness. A lingering anxiety. She always kept the toothTech at arm's length, like there was something dangerous about him. He told her she could leave early, but she didn't smile, or joyfully bounce out of the surgery ready to embrace the weekend. She gave Ariran a reassuring glance and protested, 'It's okay, I can stay until we're done.'

'No, there's no need, I can finish up here', the toothTech replied. 'Everything is under control.' He broke into a broad, mechanical smile. Two rows of perfect white teeth. Sun-bronzed skin. Then, he gesticulated toward the door with an open palm.

The assistant continued to resist, 'It's fine, honestly, I can stay and ... keep an eye on the anaesthetic ... you know, if ... if you need to use it.' She glanced at the dark rubber mask lying on a shelf behind the treatment chair. The quiver in her voice became more noticeable, more desperate. She clasped her hands together to stop them trembling. Wobbled from one leg to another. 'Really, it's fine. I can stay.'

The toothTech was calm, but insistent. 'No, go on home now. I have everything under control here. Go and spend time with your family ... and you have a nice weekend. I'll see you on Monday.'

The assistant's cheeks flushed crimson. She scurried out of the room and out of the building. The door closed with a firm thud. Ariran felt sadness wash over him.

The toothTech briefly left the room. There was a clack from the latch on the front door. He returned and marched over to Ariran. 'Any problems with your teeth?' he asked, snapping on

a pair of rubber gloves. One of the gloved hands grabbed the bright lamp above Ariran's head and pointed it at his face.

'No.' Ariran replied, gulping. He complied with instructions to open his jaw and remain still. Rubber fingers and a metal tool danced around his mouth. Squeaking. Clanking. The toothTech wore a gold watch. Chunky and manly. The curls of his hairy arms rose either side of the strap, like legs from a multitude of dead insects. Usually, the toothTech called out numbers corresponding to each tooth. His assistant would scribble notes down. This time, he was silent. The metal tool stopped on one of Ariran's molars and pressed down hard. Ariran's jaw moved down, but he felt no pain.

'Ah! Slight caries in one of your molar fissures. I'll get that sorted for you now', announced the toothTech. He fiddled with something on a shelf behind Ariran's head. Then fetched the rubber mask. 'This will help with the pain. Now take slow, deep breaths. Yes, that's it.'

Ariran felt sick and dizzy. His body began to tingle. His vision went blurry, then grainy, then black. He was out.

When he awoke, the room was spinning. His head felt incredibly heavy. Peering through blurry eyes, he could make out a clock on the far wall. It was twenty past five. Almost two hours since he'd arrived. Mother would be wondering where he was. He tried to sit up but nearly slid off the chair. The toothTech pushed him back into position. The man seemed excited and had a strange glint in his eye. A fidgeting squid gnawed Ariran's stomach. He thought he might vomit. His mouth felt sticky, like it was coated with tapioca.

The toothTech picked up a glass of pink liquid and placed a hand behind Ariran's head. 'Here. Sit up. Have a good rinse with this. That's it. Spit. And again. Now, how are you feeling?'

'I feel sick ... and ... dizzy ... the corners of my mouth hurt.'

'Not to worry, it'll wear off. Have another rinse. You'll soon feel better and forget all about it.'

'When can I have my dinner?' asked Ariran.

'No need to wait, you're fine to eat. It was only a minor procedure.'

It seemed strange. Ariran had always been told to wait a few hours before eating after fillings. Not that he was hungry. His stomach was churning. As he left the treatment room, he turned back briefly. Some weird-looking, metal calipers lay discarded on a metal table. He'd never seen them before. The toothTech ushered him to the front door. Ariran's balance was poor. It made walking a challenge. Took an age to get home.

He slammed the front door, scurried to the bathroom, and retched into the toilet. The first two convulsions were dry. The third ejected a small globule of milky white fluid from deep in his stomach. The stuff hit the side of the toilet bowl, slid down, and sank into the water. Ariran was scared. He'd been sick before, but had no idea what he'd just thrown up. His tongue and throat were stinging. A musty, salty taste in his mouth. An odd smell. Like a mixture of bleach, banana, and acrid fish.

Mother heard him retching and climbed upstairs. 'What's up? It sounded like you were being sick?'

'I ... I ... was ... it's in the toilet.'

Mother looked into the toilet. 'What is it? Have you eaten something funny?'

'Not since lunch. It didn't look like that. I was at the toothTech. He had to do some work. I don't feel so good.'

'Oh, it must be the lining of your stomach then.' Mother rolled her eyes and flushed the blob away.

Ariran was no mediTech, but there was something amiss with Mother's thinking. He'd been sick plenty of times and never seen anything like that. Besides, if it was his stomach lining, shouldn't she be worried? Didn't he need a stomach lining? What would he do without one?

'It was when I was wiping my semen up off the carpet. That first time. It triggered the memory. Suddenly, I knew what I'd puked up. There's only one way it could've got there.'

'I'm sorry to hear that you had that experience, Ariran. It shouldn't have happened. It was wrong. And you say nothing was done? Your mother didn't realize?'

'Look. I know I don't speak highly of her. It's not really her

fault, she's dim-witted and inattentive. Insensitive and lacking self-awareness. But she had kids. She'd been a bit of a bike when she was younger, from what I've heard. So, she must have known what it was, that stuff in the toilet. I think she was too weak to deal with the truth. Too weak to stand up for me. She had, has, this unhealthy respect for authority. Anyone with money, or a uniform, or a fancy title. She fawns. It's like they're all beyond reproach. Besides, how could an unintelligent single mum take on a wealthy toothTech?'

'Sure. It would have been tough, I suppose. But quite possible. Especially if she'd kept the evidence.'

Ariran began to cry.

Sofie passed him a tissue. 'It's okay to cry, Ariran.'

'Yeah ... b-but ... I wonder about all the other times.'

'There were other times?'

'I-I ... don't know. He. The toothTech. He always seemed to find holes in my teeth. But when I look back. I remember him using a drill in some of my checkups. You don't use a drill in a checkup. I think he was drilling little holes. Always in between molars. At the back, where you can't see anything in the mirror. I cleaned my teeth thoroughly every day. I was good like that. With routine. So the number of cavities I was getting made no sense to me. My brushing was futile. He often sent his assistant's out, or home. There was a time when I was really young. Mother had taken me. I only started going on my own when I was around nine. Because of serviToil, you know, she couldn't take the time off. But this time she was in the treatment room with me. I was really little. Probably five. He sent her out. Without question, she just went and sat in the waiting room. She never came in with me again. By the age of twelve, I'd had at least eight mercury fillings. He put me to sleep for all of them. It wasn't right.'

'It doesn't sound right at all. Have you told anybody else about this?'

'No. Not even Mr Aylar, my first psychTech. There's something about men. I find it difficult to talk about sexual things with them. Even when they're my age.'

'Thanks for telling me, Ariran. It must have been difficult.

Officially, I would like to say that if you felt you wanted to make a complaint to the poliTech, we could support you.'

'No. No. How could I? I wasn't even conscious.'

'Trauma can still be experienced. The mind is never fully asleep. A shocking number of people are raped while drugged or unconscious. It doesn't make it okay. You're right, it does make things more difficult, but it would lie on record at least. In time, there may be others. We could arrange a hypnosis session and see if you have any details stored away.'

'Oh no. No. That memory's bad enough. I'm not sure I could cope with anything more graphic.'

'Okay, but it is possible for you to talk under hypnosis and not remember when you wake. It's your decision. If you change your mind, or want to talk about registering an official complaint, do let me know.'

'Sure. The worse thing is my stupid family. You know, they used to tease me about having bad breath. Tenebray and Grandfather One. They went through a phase of calling me stench. I hated it. I felt dirty. But now I look back, I think it was probably tooth decay. Tenebray teasing me was one thing, she was still a kid too. But Grandfather One? And Mother was there too. She didn't stop him, or try to find the cause of the smell. It must have been bloody obvious. You know, I can't understand them at all. Where is the caring? Where is the empathy? The only word for it is neglect.'

'It sounds abusive too, Ariran.'

'I don't know. That's a strong word.'

'Teasing a kid who might have a health issue that needs attention? I'd call it abuse. Like you say, your sister is one thing, but the adults should have known better. They should have been showing Tenebray how to behave. Looking after you. Not fostering cruelty.'

'I think they're a different species. People like that. I don't understand how I ended up in that family. Grandfather One liked to buy cream cakes. That was the way he tried to get us to like him. Buying stuff. Always cakes, sweets, and fizzy drinks. Simple people, superficial love. It was more like a contract of exchange. Like me and I'll buy you cakes. Behave

and I'll buy you sweets. But food isn't love, is it? True love lies beyond such biological simplicity. True love seeks no returns. True love denies a child sweets and cakes. It thinks of the future. Recognizes the benefit of not having piles of mercury stuck inside your mouth. It's an intractable problem. I mean, for them to have the capacity to understand their lack of empathy, and their lack of compassion, these people would need to possess the very capability they don't have. Trying to get them to understand their own insensitivity would be like trying to explain algebra to a potato.'

'Some people can learn, Ariran, but you're right that people are different. It sounds like you had it tough being with a family who didn't understand you or your needs. I'm heartened though. You speak of true love. You believe a fulfilling, loving relationship is possible.'

'I know it is. Just not with them. I wonder if Mother was belittled and teased in her childhood too. Maybe empathy was trained out of her. After all, Grandfather One, could be especially wicked. As a kid, when I cried, he'd make this screwed up, fake, crying face and put on a deeply sarcastic voice. He'd say, *Oh ... oh dear ... there there ... ooowwwhh deeeaaar, we are upset aren't we ... awwww.* Mocking my feelings. Debasing my existence. It was grotesque. Nobody ever hugged me, or held me, when I was upset.'

'Grotesque sounds like an apt word. You deserved someone to hold you, to give you space to be yourself and experience your feelings. It may well be that past generations, grandparents, great-grandparents, they haven't had emotional maturity. So neither your mother nor father had it either. But there are people out there with a level of insight similar to yours, Ariran. You might find that the relationships you form through choice are much more fulfilling.'

'I know. I've learnt that here. It's just so sad. Things could have been different. For all of us.'

19. Fire

'Hey, Ari, are you gonna play?'

'What's the game?'

'Football.'

'You're playing football? Clara, I never thought I'd see the day.'

'It's for the kids. We can't waste a sunny day like this, can we?'

'Maybe I'll join you later. I'd just prefer to watch for now.'

'Are you okay?'

'Yeah. Tough session with Sofie, that's all. Stirred up some emotions.'

'Oh. We can talk later if you like?'

'Yeah, thanks.' Ariran lifted his coffee off the picnic table and took a sip. He watched Clara skip off onto the lawn, several youngsters in tow. She loved being with kids. He loved being with her. It would be tough when she was discharged. Only a week to go. At least they wouldn't have to keep things secret any more.

Ariran still had many months of treatment ahead of him. Thankfully. He found it difficult to imagine not living there any more. The spacious, clean building. Good company, day and night. Huge private garden. He felt sick at the thought of returning home. Still, the way things were shaping up, he'd often be able to stay with Clara. She'd already invited him to spend a weekend in her small, riverside flat. Maybe he'd find somewhere nearby to live and never have to return home.

'Hi, Ariran.'

'Oh, hi, Flo', he replied, shielding his eyes from the sun.

'Didn't you want to play?'

'Not at the moment. Maybe later.'

Flo was a paliTech. Pleasant. Kind. A little disorganized. The appearance and demeanour of an office worker who's

been out for a couple of after-work drinks on a Friday. Hair that looked like it had landed rather than grown. Trouser suit. Sneakers. Creased blouse, open at the top three buttons, revealing sumptuous, crowfoot cleavage.

'Do you mind if I sit with you for a moment?' she asked, sitting down.

'Sure, Flo. No problem.'

'Thing is. I wanted to talk to you. About you and Clara. Several of the staff have noticed, there seems to be something going on, and ... well, we're concerned about it.'

'Oh, we're just good friends. Nothing to worry about.'

'I thought you'd say that. It's okay, but it might be best to talk about it. I know you're probably worried about the rules, but we won't hold things said in confidence against you.'

'No, nothing.' Ariran looked at Clara out on the lawn. Her auburn hair gleamed in the sunlight. She had the broadest smile. 'She is beautiful though.'

'Well, I can see you don't feel able to be open. But, we are worried. There's a danger in such a relationship. It would be better to stay out of anything more than friendship until your treatment is complete.'

'Seriously? I'm not saying there's anything going on, but if there was, what would be so dangerous about it?'

'I can't go into detail. It's just for the best, Ariran. I know it's hard, I wish I could explain more, but in the long run, it would be better for you, and for Clara.'

'I hear you. Was there anything else?'

'No. I'll leave you to it. Just think about what I've said. If you need to talk, come and find me.'

Clara's final week passed quickly. They spent every night together, each more precious than the last. He couldn't fathom what was so problematic. The staff seemed to know something but couldn't tell him. Maybe something Clara had said in a session. It would make sense. They couldn't divulge anything like that. But he knew she'd tell him anything important. They had no secrets from each other.

Clara leant against a lamppost, checking her watch every

thirty seconds. Eventually, the bus arrived. Ariran jumped off, hurried over, and embraced her passionately. It was four days since they'd seen each other.

'I've missed you soooo much', said Clara.

'Me too.'

'Can I ask you something?'

'Sure, anything.'

'What do you see when you look at me?'

'Well, I see a gorgeous woman with hair like the rays of a beautiful sunset. A kiss between the nurturing earth and the mystery of our star. Eyes like two lush oases, with a black well in the centre, a portal to an eternal place of loving surrender.'

'What else?'

'I see ... no, I *feel* a fire from within you, a deep timeless sea of warmth and love. It's like, I can see you with my heart, taste you, something more real than the body, something beyond the material realm. A nourishing eternal flame that will never die out, even after, I ... does this sound weird?'

'No, no. I knew it! I knew you were a seer.'

'What?'

'A wise person once told me that only the truly ignorant rely on their eyes to see. I've been so worried. I thought they were going to stop you seeing me. They're trying to stop you, aren't they?'

'Yeah, kind of, but they couldn't stop me, not in a million years.'

'Good. They'll keep working on you though.'

'Why do you think that?'

'I just know it. Come on, I'll show you round town, and we can grab a coffee.'

The pair walked off down the busy high street arm-in-arm. After a quick tour of the locale, and a stop for refreshments, Clara took Ariran to a local hippy shop and bought some massage oil. They strolled back to her flat. She'd painted the walls orange in anticipation of his visit.

'Thought it would brighten the place up! I felt a bit down. It's been hard living on my own again but ... I might have made

a bad choice with this, it's a bit bright isn't it?' she said giggling.

'It's definitely bright! But if you like it, so what?'

'Well, I'm not sure I do now. Maybe when you move in, you could redecorate?'

'Move in?'

'Ooops, I mean, if you did, like in the future sometime.'

'Maybe. How about that massage?'

The evening unfolded beautifully. Sensual massage. Dinner by candlelight. Slow, loving sex. Now they were alone, the couple were able to express themselves with a passion that hadn't been possible before. Clara draped herself across the top of the bed naked. Ariran took his time kissing, tickling, stroking, and licking her body. Afterwards, she rested her head on Ariran's chest and smoked a cigarette. Enthused by sex-generated neurochemicals, they talked about things for hours. Big things and small things. The past and the future. Suddenly, Ariran heard himself say it. He'd killed Doug Havishan.

Clara sat up with a start. 'You killed who?'

'Doug Havishan. He was a friend, sort of. When I was a kid.'

'Ariran? What are you saying?'

'I've never told anyone. Sorry. I didn't mean—'

'You have to tell me. Tell me everything.'

'I'm scared. You won't see me in the same way again. I'm not evil. It was just a moment.'

'Tell me, Ariran. I've seen and heard some things in my time, believe me, duckie. Besides, you can't hold back now. Take a chance. I can't promise anything, but it's over if you don't tell me.'

'Okay. I was little. Some kids were mucking around in the street. I'd gone to play with them. Just kicking a ball round. Playing pretend. That sort of thing. Then one of them, Kuu his name was, he said he knew of a secret place. A cool place. He wanted us to go there. He could turn really nasty if you didn't do what he wanted. And we were curious. So we went. Four of us. Over the road. Down an alley. Through a gap in the fence.

Along the railway embankment. Down to the tracks. Kuu showed us a rope swing his older brother had hung from a tree. It was wrapped round a branch. We couldn't reach it. Kuu was pissed. He looked around for something else he could impress us with. There was nothing. An old mattress. A dead bird. None of us knew what we were doing there. It was just Kuu trying to show off. He started this game of chicken. Kicking and throwing the ball across the tracks. Me and Doug on one side. Kuu and the other kid opposite. Doug wanted to leave. I did too but didn't say anything. Kuu got angry with Doug, said we all had to stay until the train came. He lobbed a brick at Doug, punishment for wanting to leave. It hit his shin. He cried for a bit. Then we carried on with the game.

'I was thinking we could just run when the train came. Get away home. We were on the side of the track closest to the gap in the fence. So we kept playing with the ball, waiting for an opportunity to bolt. I began to enjoy it. Forgot where I was. Kuu passed the ball to me. I picked it up and kicked it as hard as I could. It hit Doug on the back of the head. He fell onto the track and started whimpering. Just lay there, face down, and wouldn't get up. Then, a train came. We watched as it approached, expecting Doug to jump up and get out of the way, but he didn't. I could have got him. Dragged him away. Shouted that a train was coming. We had plenty of time. But I didn't. It was like I froze. But not just fear. Part of me wanted to see what happened. Wanted to see the train hit Doug. I don't know why.' Ariran started crying.

'Okay, Ari. Come here.' Clara held him tightly until he could speak again.

'He died, Clara. When he realized the rumbling was very close, he tried to move. It was instinct, but his hand went directly onto the third rail. The electric one. His body convulsed, fizzed, and crackled. Then the train ran over him. His hands and head were severed. Blood spurted everywhere. It seemed unreal. I couldn't move. Then it hit me. It was real. We tried to run off, but Kuu had us trapped. He'd got to the gap in the fence first. Stood there blocking our way. Made us swear an oath not to tell. We cut our thumbs and shared the

blood. See.' Ariran showed her the faint scar on his thumb.

'Did you tell the police?'

'No. Nobody. I was frightened. Scared of Kuu. Scared they would say I was a murderer. You're the first person I ever told.'

'Oh. But didn't they investigate?'

'Yeah. The train driver said he'd seen two kids. He couldn't describe anyone. I don't think he was paying attention, I mean, he didn't brake until after he'd hit Doug. The train was almost empty. A handful of pensioners and the odd drunk. They hadn't seen anything. The police just said the boy had been playing on the tracks. Did a safety campaign. The railTechs patched up the fence.'

'Oh, Ari. They were right. You were just a kid mucking around. If they'd maintained the fencing properly, you wouldn't even have been there.'

'But I could've saved him. I could've pulled him clear. I didn't even shout to warn him.'

'We both know the mind can do strange things. You were so young, it's not your fault that you didn't react straight away.'

'Don't you see me differently, now you know what I did?'

'No. I'm happy that you trust me. I can't believe you've carried that burden for so long alone. It must have been awful.'

'I did tell Iggy.'

'Who's Iggy?'

'He was my pet dog. Mother had him destroyed while I was at uniTech.'

'Oh. Poor Iggy. Hey, maybe we could get a dog some day?'

'Yeah, maybe. Don't you think of me differently at all now?'

'Yes. I think you've been even stronger and braver than I previously thought. I love you.'

Ariran was overjoyed when he woke the next day with Clara in his arms. He'd shared his secret. The world didn't implode. And it was their first morning together. He stroked her hair until she woke and kissed him. After a light breakfast, they took a walk in the local park. Ate lunch in a cafe. Meandered

by the riverside, arm-in-arm. Back at the flat, Ariran prepared dinner and ran Clara a bath. He sprinkled some flower petals into the water. A secret harvest from the park while Clara was watching some kids playing.

Sunday came all too quickly. Ariran could have stayed forever but had to return to treatment. Despite her concerns about the staff trying to break them apart, Clara made him promise to complete his full year. No matter what. She didn't want him to attempt suicide ever again. And he had to talk about Doug's death. After a long embrace, they walked hand-in-hand to the bus stop. Clara stood in the rain, waving goodbye. The bus pulled away, belching black smoke toward her. Ariran blew a kiss. Held his hand flat against the window. He'd be back in two weeks. It would fly by.

Back in the community mansion, staff continued to raise concern about the relationship. Ariran had made it public, now Clara was no longer a patient. But he was rattled by their insistence. What did they know, or think they knew, that he didn't? Was it simply their history of suicide attempts? Clara's had been passive. Due to the severity of her diabetes, all she had to do was stop injecting insulin and fall into a coma. Even with careful management, she could become extremely lethargic. Several times a year she passed out and woke up in hospiTech. Were they worried about a suicide pact? Maybe they thought he'd kill himself if Clara died in a diabetic fit. He couldn't bear the thought of her dying. If she did, he might well kill himself through grief. But he couldn't justify ending a relationship on that basis, it would invalidate life's only saving grace.

Without Clara, Ariran spent much more time alone, mostly thinking about her. After considerable introspection, he decided to talk things over with a paliTech.

'Flo. Have you got time for a chat?'

'Sure, Ariran. Would you like to go somewhere private?'

'Yeah, I think it's best.'

There was a snug near the dining room. It was empty. Ariran and Flo sat on the sofa.

'So. What did you want to talk about? You haven't really

been yourself lately, have you?'

'No. I miss Clara, but I've been thinking. I'm in love. I'm sure I am, but ... well, I don't know what's worrying you lot, but I know it must be something, you wouldn't be concerned about nothing.'

'I know you two are very close. You've disengaged since she left. Everyone's noticed. Was your weekend okay? Did something happen?'

'It was wonderful. I didn't want to come back. I could be with her forever.'

'So you're missing her? I know that can be hard. But it seems like you've left something there too. A piece of yourself that's now missing from here. And it could be an important piece in terms of your treatment.'

'Yeah. I don't really know what you mean, but I do feel less whole without her. She made me promise to stay until the end. I guess I could cool things for a few weeks and see how things go. If it's true love, both ways, she'll be able to wait. If you're saying it's for my own good ...'

'That sounds sensible, Ariran. We do believe that. How will you tell her?'

'I'll call her.'

'Would you like some support?'

'No, I'll do it later. Best it's private.'

'I knew they'd do this, I knew they'd drive us apart, bastards!' Clara said. She began sobbing.

'Look, it's only for a little while, I don't want to lose you.'

'Lose me Ari? Don't want to lose me, so you're dumping me? What rot.'

'No, I'm not. I'm not dumping you, I love you.'

'Love? You don't dump someone you love! And not the day before, it's Thursday for fuck's sake, you're supposed to be coming tomorrow.'

'I'm sorry, I know it's short notice. Look, I'm not dumping you. Please don't think of it like that. I need a little time to think about things and get these psychTechs off my back. I'm happy when I'm with you. So happy, I sometimes worry I'm

hallucinating. But ... well, we might have lost sight of the bigger picture. I mean, what if something happens and we end up dead? True love can wait, surely?'

'Listen to yourself, Ariran! You're happy, and you're running away from being happy. It sounds pathological, not sensible. And what bigger picture? All I see is you and me. That's good enough, isn't it? I don't understand what you're saying. If you want to split up, grow a pair will you? You can't do this to me. Did you get your oats? Is that all you really wanted? How long do you want to wait? You'll see. They'll keep working on you. Weeks will become months. We'll drift apart. You'll never speak to me again. Please come and stay this weekend. Please. I so want to see you. We can talk more then. Don't do this without coming to see me first. I need to see your eyes.'

'I don't know how long ... no, look, I can't come this weekend. I already told them. Maybe in a week or two. I need more time to think. Things are so intense. I'm confused. Maybe what I'm saying doesn't make sense. I guess that's a sign of where I'm at. I'm not dumping you. Come on. It'll get them off my back. It'll fly by.'

'Do you really think they'll leave it alone if you wait a couple of weeks? You're a fool.'

'But why would they—'

'Because of what happened to Anna and Sybil.'

'I don't know what happened to them.'

'Didn't I tell you?'

'No, I—'

'They were like me and you, but had been together in treatment longer. And they had it easier because they shared a room. The staff didn't know. Anna left treatment a couple of weeks before Sybil. That's when they found out and tried to stop it. But the girls refused. They were found dead a couple of days after Sybil was discharged.'

'Dead? Suicide?'

'Yeah. It wasn't classed as suicide. They both died of a massive heroin overdose. But they'd been clean the whole time there. Not even booze. It didn't make sense. I think they

couldn't face life out here. The real world is so horrible and nasty, especially if you're a bit different. So they went out on a high together. But that's not me and you. We can't be judged by what someone else did.'

'No ... I, I guess that's what they're scared of. Maybe me too. I mean, I want to be with you forever but ... life ... out there.'

'I'm out here! I love you. You can't leave me on my own like this, it's not fair.' Clara continued to sob loudly.

Ariran heard her move away from the mouthpiece so she could blow her nose. He began to cry quietly. There was a long silence. It felt like something had died. He gripped the black phone so hard his knuckles turned white. Words weren't making sense to him any more. The only thing he wanted was to hold her. To comfort her. How he hated telephones. Suddenly, she burst out crying, louder than ever. He listened to her weeping. The pain he'd caused. Tears dribbled from his chin. His mind froze.

After several minutes, Clara managed to speak, spitting out words between sobs and gasps for air, 'Right ... okay ... if ... if it's what you want ... I hope you find what you're looking for to fill that big picture of yours, I love you ... goodbye.'

'Wait—'

The phone clicked dead. Ariran's heart dropped into his boots. Every sinew in his body told him he was making a mistake. His heart was on fire, shooting out hot embers that burnt and charred his soul. Yet, his head kept telling him he was being reasonable. It was only temporary. They could pick up where they left things. He replaced the receiver and thought about calling back. Instinct told him to do it. To tell her he'd changed his mind. He'd visit that weekend. You can't put love on hold. It was a ridiculous idea. But he hesitated. She might think he was gaslighting, not struggling with his thoughts and feelings. It wouldn't be fair to mess her about. He fished into his pocket. There wasn't enough change to make another call. One of the other patients knocked on the door. They wanted to use the phone and were growing impatient. Reluctantly, he gave up the booth and went to his

room.

Ariran didn't sleep that night. The words of the conversation kept replaying in his head. In every silent moment, he heard Clara sobbing. Distant. Alone. He could make no sense of what he'd done. They'd been so happy. So hopeful. Now they were both in pain. That was the bigger picture. He wanted to hold her. To caress her face and stroke her hair. He wanted her to see that he was in pain too. Only by being together, physically together, could their hearts connect. That was the only way she could know he meant well, even if he was fucking things up. Telephones were of no use at such times. People are so much more than words and sounds.

After cancelling his visit to Clara's, Ariran arranged to go home for the weekend. A place that wouldn't remind him of her. But the staff noticed how down he was on the Friday morning. Worried, they encouraged him to postpone his trip home and stay with the community. He agreed. For the rest of the day, he sat and stared out of the window. Autumn was ending. Later than usual. A couple of squirrels were hastily gathering the last of their winter pantry. It went dark. Ariran went to bed early.

Saturday was spent moping and wandering in the garden alone. Every so often, he had the urge to leave. Catch the bus. Surprise Clara. If only he had a car or motorbike, he might have been able to sneak off, but it was two long bus rides to get to her. There was no chance he'd make the trip unnoticed. By Saturday evening, he realized his mistake. As sure as love existed, he was in love. It wasn't infatuation. It was nothing sinister. It was love. His heart told him so. Suicide could never be part of his life with Clara. She was everything to him. The only risk he could foresee was of them not being together. What were the staff thinking of? Fuck them. Fuck treatment. She was the life he wanted. The life he'd always wanted. He felt joyful and thought about calling her, but worried he'd fumble for words on the telephone. It wasn't a call he could risk fucking up. He decided to write a letter.

Dear Clara,

I hate myself for letting you down. I love you dearly. The staff are convinced that we should remain separate while I engage in treatment. They believe it's dangerous for us to be together. It doesn't feel dangerous to me, it feels natural and good. I love getting lost in your sparkling green eyes. I love stroking and smelling your beautiful auburn hair. When I'm in your arms, I feel at peace, at home. I want to hold you forever. I got confused and wasn't sure what to do. I'm sorry for what happened on our phone call. If you can forgive me, I'm going to reject the advice of the staff. I want to come see you as soon as possible. If it's dangerous, so be it, I'll live dangerously!

I know I'm a fool, and hope I haven't broken your heart. I promise I'm not playing games. The only future I can see is with you. Maybe I'll leave this place, do serviToil, perhaps some babysitting, I seem to be good at that. Sorry for the letter, I find it hard to speak on the telephone, and I ran out of loose change. This seemed the best way to get my thoughts down. Please forgive me and write back or call soon. Let me know if I can see you again. Maybe I could stay for the festival of winter lights, it isn't far off now. We could put up a tree and decorations together. I'd love it if we could pick up where we left off.

Yours truly and madly in love,

Ariran xxx

P.S. I could paint over the orange with something a bit more neutral, and maybe we could hang a picture of a sunset, or something with some nice orange bits in? Maybe a picture of an actual orange?

Ariran sealed the envelope and placed it in his jacket pocket, ready to post on Monday morning, once the cleaning and morning meeting were done with.

Monday arrived quickly. Ariran hoovered and polished with

renewed fervour. He guessed that he'd make the postbox in time for the late morning collection. The letter should arrive at Clara's flat the following day. If she forgave him, he'd be in her arms again that Friday. Once chores were finished, he made coffee and took it to the main lounge, ready for the community meeting. He sat in a plush green chair. It reminded him of her eyes. As soon as the meeting was over, he'd grab someone for a walk.

People began to fill the room. Ariran detected an odd vibe. One of the paliTechs looked like she'd been crying. The community director entered. He wasn't a regular attendee at these meetings. When he did attend, he usually took a passive role. It was always a patient's job to act as chairperson. But not that day.

The director cleared his throat awkwardly, then explained he had bad news. He didn't beat about the bush. Clara had been found dead in her flat by a neighbour. Ariran's world shattered. Wholly and completely. He wept continuously for an hour, melting limply into the green chair. She died alone. She'd never see his letter. The director said it appeared she'd failed to take her insulin, lapsed into a coma, and died. One of her neighbours knocked every Sunday morning to check up on her and share a cup of tea. A kind, older woman. Clara had saved the woman when her ex was battering her one night. They'd become good friends. She knocked again in the evening after dark. Clara's lights hadn't been switched on. The curtains remained drawn all day. The woman called the poliTech. They kicked the door down and found Clara dead on the bed.

She left no note, but Ariran knew. He'd broken her heart. Betrayed love for reason. He felt inside his coat and pulled out the envelope. Removing the letter, he began to read his words. Why hadn't he called her? It would have been easy enough to go to the shop and get some change for the phone, or borrow some from another patient. He'd thought his choice had been about means of expression, not a matter of life or death. A mistake he would carry forever.

20. Rituals

Ariran first met Clara's parents at the entrance to the funeral chapel. He introduced himself as a friend. They smiled politely. Shook his hand. Thanked him for attending. Her mother told him Clara looked like she was dressed for a special occasion when she died. Carefully brushed hair. Manicured nails. A lush, green velvet dress. Her best silver jewellery. But no shoes. They were all in the bin. Ariran entered the chapel. Found an empty pew near the back. Burst into tears.

The service started. Nobody spoke except the officiant. A dry, impersonal, off-the-peg script. Generic songs, mumble-sung in apathy, by a choir of phlegm. Prayers dedicated to the memory of a young girl. A daughter, seen through the frozen imagination of her parents. Nothing was said about the woman he'd known. Her humour and sensuality. The things she cared about and enjoyed doing. The depth of her love and sensitivity. When the automated curtains drew around the coffin, Ariran was still waiting for confirmation that the person in the box was the woman he'd loved. Clara's parents didn't know her. Maybe that was why she needed him so much. He'd seen her. Made her feel whole and real.

On his way to the bus stop, he turned back to watch the black-clad strangers dispersing. The faintest of wisps rose from the crematorium chimney, quickly dissolving into the surrounding air.

Several days after the funeral, Ariran was in the local store. As he stood at the checkout, fumbling for his wallet, his fingers found the letter to Clara. It was still in his coat pocket. Without thinking, he ordered a pack of cigarettes. Clara's brand. He'd given up smoking before joining the community. Hope made it easy. Even during the time he spent with her, he hadn't been tempted. But now he needed a crutch. A

reminder. He returned to the community garden, found a secluded area, and set the letter alight. As he watched it burn, he sucked in smoke from a cigarette. The closest he'd ever get to tasting her again.

The weeks following the funeral passed in a haze. Ariran dripped with melancholy. Exudate from roots of despair, feeding a dense, toxic mycelium. A dark, metaphysical mucus he'd almost escaped. His old self. With Clara, he'd been born anew. He'd felt whole. Loved. Solid. Real. But it didn't last. This was his true self. Alone. Disconnected. Impalpable. Maybe that's why he'd put the relationship on hold. Deep down, he'd lost who he was. His very identity was bleakness.

'We've sat in silence for twenty minutes, Ariran. Is there anything you'd like to say?'

'No.'

'You seem angry.'

'No, I'm fine. Just nothing to say, Sofie. That's all.'

'You used to talk a lot until Clara died. I know it's been tough, but this is the place to talk about your feelings. It's okay if you're angry. If you feel your emotions are too difficult, we can let them breathe here.'

'What do you want me to say? To forgive you?'

'Forgive? What for?'

'You killed her. You lot. You destroyed us. You destroyed her.'

'It was a diabetic coma, Ariran. It was her disease that killed her.'

'She did it deliberately. Because I'd put things on hold. She thought she was going to lose me for good. I should have listened to her. She said she couldn't live without me. She meant it. You lot worked on me. I wasn't strong enough ...' Ariran held his hands over his face and began to cry. 'Why did this have to happen? I ... loved her. What was so dangerous about that?'

'I understand you believe she did it deliberately, but there's no evidence for that. She left no note.'

'Are you fucking with me? Her death was the note. Eternal

silence. She told me ... she was dressed for the end ...'

'I see that you loved her. Maybe you could tell me about what you loved about her?'

'Everything. Her eyes. Her cheeky grin. Her laughter. That moody, distant look she got when her diabetes was playing up. The way she smiled when I stroked her cheek. The smell of her armpits just before she showered. The way she kissed. Making love. Holding hands. Sleeping by her side.'

'Yes, she was popular here. We're all saddened by her death, Ariran. Nobody wanted it to happen.'

'That stupid orange paint on her walls. Smelling her hair. The way she waved goodbye. How she made tea. She put the teabag in the bin, not the sink. I loved that about her. I can picture her now, playing with the kids at the pool, laughing and splashing.'

'That sounds like a good way to remember her.'

'She couldn't have kids. I think it made her sad.'

'I'm not sure that's true, Ariran. Did you use protection when you made love?'

'No. What do you mean not true? You mean she could get pregnant?'

'Technically, yes. It's complex. I shouldn't have said anything, sorry. I can't really say any more.'

'I have to go, Sofie. I need to be alone.'

Months passed. Long-standing patients left. New ones arrived. Ariran didn't care much. He said his goodbyes. Greeted newcomers. Got on with things. Then Holly arrived. Broad northern accent. Restless eyes, filled with angry sadness. She hated bullshit. Euphemistic positivity drove her nuts. If people tried to frame trauma like it was meaningful, like it was some sacred life lesson, she set them right. There was something about her that Ariran connected with. Not a romantic attraction. But he began to feel more real around her, like he had a soul again, oddly contradicting her core convictions. Holly shunned talk of anything even vaguely spiritual. Yet, she was very guarded, like she was protecting something sacred at her core.

When Holly opened up, it was entirely unexpected. The two of them were sitting on a picnic bench in the garden, drinking tea.

'I'm glad you came here,' Ariran said, 'I'd be lost without you. The way you've listened to me talk about Clara, I feel like I'm coming alive again. It's great that we're friends.'

'Oh, I'm happy it's helped, but we're acquaintances, not friends. There's so much you don't know about me', Holly whispered through a tight smile.

'Well, I'm all ears if you ever want to share', replied Ariran, sincerely.

'Oh, listen to you, you sound like a psychTech. A poor impression of one anyway.'

'Steady on, Holly. I mean it. If you want to talk, I'm all ears.'

'Like an ass?' she giggled.

'Sure, I'll be an ass if you like.'

Her joviality vanished instantly. She gave him an icy stare. 'Well ... if I tell you something, you must promise never to tell anybody.'

'Sure. You can trust me.'

'Holly isn't my real name. It's Cristina.'

'Oh?'

'But you must never call me that. There are people looking for me.'

'Looking for you? Who?'

'People who want to kill me.'

'Kill you? Why would anyone want to kill you?'

'Shhh! Keep it down. I know things.'

'What things?'

'Things you wouldn't believe. I ... I don't think I can tell you, sorry.' Holly looked away. She was trying to hide the pain. An intertwining of internal pain evoked by bad memories, and the pain of her dilemma about how much she could trust him.

Ariran tried to reassure her, 'Okay, no pressure, but I'm true to my word. Wouldn't you feel better if you told me? It must be hard to carry a secret alone?'

'Ummm ... well ... okay. It's my family, they want me dead.'

'Your family?'

'Yes. You see, my dad was ... a bad man, a terrible man. He abused me as a child. It started young. Infrequent at first. Then, when I was seven, he locked me in the attic naked. He was in a secret group. They all came around for dinner and drinks. My mother cooked for them. When they'd finished eating, they came upstairs one by one and raped me. All of them.' A river of tears flowed from Holly's eyes and down her cheeks.

'Oh no, Holly.' Ariran reached for her hand to try to comfort her, but she pulled it back quickly.

'Please, don't touch me. After they were all done, they left me there for hours. In the filth and blood. I was covered in shit ... blood and semen. Even my own mother was in on it. She didn't look happy, but she did nothing to stop them. She never spoke about it afterwards. The whole family are so fucked up. It went on for years after that. At first, my brother was my solace. They abused him too. We shared our suffering. But he was weak ... eventually ... they turned him. Turned him into one of their evil converts. When I was twelve, he raped me too. My own brother. He wanted to feel what it was like to be on the other side.'

'Was there nobody you could turn to?'

'No. The family looked like a normal family from the outside. We didn't go out much. When we did, it was all very controlled. A false front. Dad, the committed serviToiler. Quiet and charming. A doting housewife. Two well-behaved kids. Smart clothes. Nice car. They appeared so normal. I was trained to be afraid. So afraid. I found it impossible to speak out. When I was in my late teens, I managed to pluck up the courage to run away. Spent a couple of weeks homeless. Boy, that was fun! Starving. Cold. Being pissed on. I got raped then too, although being raped as an object hurt less than being raped as a daughter. Maybe I was accustomed to it. I just numbed out. At home, I was still sort of a person, I was seen. I had a name and a story, albeit a horror story. So I still had feelings. And I knew the rapist. Homeless, I was nothing. I became nothing. An inconvenient object on the pavement, like

a dogshit people had to walk around. It was an easier kind of hell.

'Eventually I was placed in a hostel. The charity who ran it encouraged me to go to the poliTech. I was reluctant, but they talked me round. When I contacted the poliTech, they laughed at me. Told me to stop telling stories. I couldn't believe it. I reported them. The charity took me seriously. They found a lawyer. He seemed okay. He took things seriously too and helped me with my complaint. The matter was referred higher up. Then the poliTech sent out a detective.

'This so-called detective seemed genuine. Took a statement. Said he'd follow things up. But five hours after he left, Dad turned up at the hostel. That bastard had given him the address. Either he didn't believe me or he was connected to someone in their sick little club. Dad threatened to murder me there and then. He was beating on the door, but there were others around and he left. He said he'd find me wherever I went. Said he had contacts everywhere. Some of those who'd raped me, you see, they were in the poliTech, in the legal system, one was a senior judge.'

'Oh Holly, I'm so sorry. Those sick bastards! I want to give you a hug, but I guess—'

'NO! Don't come near me.'

'Okay ... it's okay, I won't. I only—'

'I know. But you must understand. I don't like anybody touching my body anywhere. Nobody. Nothing personal.'

'Sure. I understand. What happened after the hostel?'

'I've been on the run ever since. Changed my name. Changed my appearance. Even got two years into a full-time law degree. Then I had a massive breakdown. They put me in a psych hospiTech. Drugged me up. One of the staff sexually assaulted me. Again, I wasn't believed. Sick little perve. He was always around when someone was being sedated. Who knows what else he's got away with? I had to move on. To escape. I can't stay anywhere long. If my father knew I was here, he'd come and kill me.' Holly looked up briefly and flashed an accusatory look at Ariran. Then she looked down at her shoes.

'No, Holly, nobody would allow that to happen.'

'Allow it? You don't know my father. He's ruthless. Well-connected. He could get away with it. I know it sounds incredible. You probably think I'm mad. Deluded. But I'm telling you how it is. This is reality, like it or not. My reality anyway. They're everywhere these people. They just aren't like other humans.'

'Like a different species.'

'Exactly! Too many people don't understand that. They think everyone is the same. Or that these, whatever they are, that they're rare. But they're not. They know they're different. And they know they're difficult to spot, unless they get caught doing something. Most of them get by without being noticed. They ... his network ... they can arrange alibis. Frame people. Find ways of ... one guy who was researching this stuff, an independent journalist, he's in prison now. Life for a murder he didn't commit. They set him up. I've seen them kill children.'

Ariran's mind was reeling. 'What? You've seen them kill children?'

'Yes. They used to do rituals. Not often. Mostly it was casual abuse. But rituals were a rite of passage to gain a higher place in The Order.'

'The Order? Glow Freaks? Descenders?' It was hard to believe, but Ariran did believe it. He could see the pain in Holly's eyes. In her face. In her body. Ordinarily, she was strong and confident in her demeanour, but as she was telling Ariran about her abuse, her whole being crumpled. She looked tiny and translucent as she relived these secret horrors.

Holly continued, speaking every word with a tremble. 'Some of them were from The Order, but only so they could make connections and influence people. Their little group was a separate affair. It was all about evil. They didn't believe in anything. Only the force of their own will. The will to dominate. Sure, they put on robes and lit candles sometimes, but there wasn't any supernatural belief behind it. It was just their sick way of getting kicks.'

'Your brother?'

'He's one of them now. The abuse splits you. You can't develop a proper identity. Y-you ... you have no way of engaging with life ... you ... he ... turned to their empty sickness. Gave in. Became sickness.'

Ariran felt like puking. Holly had revealed so much. About herself. About the world. About aspects of life people preferred to ignore. It was a privilege to have been trusted with such information, but he felt guilty. He'd nothing of this scale to share. His family life had been a torment. He suffered with chronic physical illness. Clara's death had broken his heart. He'd seen cruelty and knew that some people were monsters. But nothing he'd suffered seemed anything but trivial in light of Holly's experience. He couldn't share his deepest secret about Doug Havishan. It was different. Clara had understood. But it would frighten Holly. She'd definitely think he was a demon then. 'I'm so sorry, Holly. All those times I've talked in group. And you sat there with this in your heart. It must have sounded like trivial whinging.'

'Don't kid yourself. Your life was pretty shit too. And Clara. That's fate kicking you in the balls for trying to be happy. The world is evil. No. That would suggest there's an opposite. A goodness. But there isn't. I don't know a word to describe it. Hell without heaven. Utterly deprived and sick. A permanent disease.'

'But you, Holly, you didn't give in to the sickness, you weren't like them?'

'I'm not so sure. Maybe I was a hybrid love child, a genetic anomaly, or an abductee. I might have real parents out there somewhere. But, Ariran, I do have bad thoughts. Sometimes, I think I'm turning into one of them. Sometimes, I laugh at my own abuse. Laugh at myself. Sneer at that pathetic little girl, crying in the dark. A cruel laugh. Deep inside. That's when I hurt myself.' She rolled up the sleeves of her thin, burgundy cardigan, and held her arms out. Nothing but scars from wrist to elbow. A rippling sea of trauma. Ariran flinched when he imagined the number of self-inflicted cuts it had taken to make that mess. Yet, it seemed, even if her whole body was nothing but scars, it would still not adequately express the

horror and pain she'd experienced.

Holly continued, 'And there's the babies, my babies.'

'You have children?'

Holly shook her head. 'I had babies. Three in total. The first when I was thirteen. Rape babies. They took them.'

'Who?'

'My mother and father. I never saw them again after they were born.'

'But ... can't you trace them? Report them missing?'

'No, no, no ... oh SHIT ... you're so naive.' Holly laughed sarcastically. 'Fuck, you don't know what these people are, do you? They kept me in the house when I was pregnant. There was a mediTech in their circle. He'd check my health periodically, but there were no records. Nothing. That's how they get away with it. I birthed them all in the house, then they took them. They didn't register them. There were, are, no hospiTech records. No mediTech records.'

'Weren't you missed from skolOpticon?'

'I didn't go. They kept me away.'

'Where did they take them? The babies?'

'I don't know. Killed. Sold. I don't know ... you can make a fortune selling children. There's an international market. Unregistered ones fetch a very high price. I saw them kill other babies. They forced me to watch. They tried to make me take part. My brother did it once. He put his hands on the hilt of the dagger as it was pushed in. They could never make me do that. Never.'

Listening to Holly was overwhelming. Ariran didn't doubt anything she told him. She was speaking from the heart. He could see the terrified, blue eyes of that little girl, looking out from the dark attic. Hoping. Willing someone to come and save her. Nobody came. Not that night. Not in the years that followed. And yet what tremendous will to escape. To try to build anew. To reinvent herself. She was still deeply troubled and in treatment, but at least she was no child abuser. He wondered how many of those society considered successful were really evil. Maybe his toothTech had been a member of one of these groups. He'd heard about child abuse rings and

covens of descenders, but there wasn't much concrete evidence for them. Few prosecutions. But there had been some. Sometimes involving dozens of people. And it was no wonder there weren't more. Holly had explained why. These people were organized. Most areas of society were arranged with hierarchy and secrecy at their core. It meant just a handful of well-placed individuals could influence, distort, and control. Business, politics, religion, they were all pyramids of power. Some men and women were not like other humans, that much Ariran did know. He'd always known it. And he knew they were precisely the sort who would thrive in a world dominated by covert power.

Holly saw that Ariran was disturbed by her outpouring. 'I'm sorry, I shouldn't have told you.'

'Hey ... it's okay, I ... I ...'

'Don't speak ... there's nothing ... I can't believe I told you, you're only the third person. The others betrayed me.' Suddenly, Holly's posture stiffened. She stopped crying and wiped her eyes with the back of her hands. Then she glared at Ariran fiercely. 'You will too. You will also betray me.'

'No—'

'You will. They all do. Look. I have to go. Get some space and wash. I feel dirty when I talk about what happened, so I have to wash. If I get too upset, I scrub so hard I draw blood.'

'Okay, but try not to. I promise you, no-one will hear any of it from me.'

'I know that's a lie. But I forgive you. It's my fault for talking.' Holly stood up. With a barely perceptible shimmy, she re-clothed herself in the confident, assertive persona she normally wore. Then she strode off.

Ariran sat at the picnic bench for a long time, trying to digest what he'd heard. He was in awe of Holly and all she'd survived, but also felt that she'd seen something in him. Something real that others didn't have. It caused his heart to burn with a spiritual fire he hadn't felt in some time. Still, he felt nervous about her expectation of betrayal. And how many others were there like her? Ten, a hundred, a thousand? One was one too many. He was engulfed with rage. Rage against

the depravity. Rage against the greatGlow. Rage he had no outlet for. If he had the power, he would end all existence for all time to stop such despicable things from ever happening again.

The following morning, he saw Holly at workgroup and tried to act normal. With a gentle smile, he said, 'Morning, Holly.'

She glared back and said nothing.

For a further week, Ariran was on the receiving end of her stony silence. Eventually, he plucked up the courage to confront her and ask what was going on.

'Ha! You know what's going on.'

'No, Holly, I don't. Have I done something?'

'You know what you've done. You tricked me. Caught me out. Played on my vulnerability.'

'No, I di—'

'Yes, yes, yes! And I will have to be very careful around you now. My lips are sealed, spy.'

'Spy? No, I'm not a spy. I'm your friend.'

Holly turned her back and walked away.

He'd hoped they'd be lifelong friends. He wanted to support her. Maybe even help bring evil to justice. Those thoughts had to be shelved. Maybe time would soften her. They could become good friends again before he left treatment. But then Colin arrived.

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21. Colin

Colin was the largest nineteen-year-old Ariran had ever seen. Six feet six inches. Twenty stone. The personality and behaviour of a six-year-old. It seemed odd that he was admitted. Most patients were highly intelligent. Introverted. Existentially troubled. Self-harmers and failed suicides like Ariran. Many had a propensity for drug or alcohol abuse. Colin had none of those traits. He was an aggressive, childish mammoth. And he'd been placed in Ariran's room. That sacred space Clara had visited late at night.

Initially, Ariran was friendly with Colin. The boy seemed curious to learn, albeit that his mannerisms were odd, and his responses often inappropriate. Usually talkative, he was quiet in group psychTalk. Watching. Listening. Then, one day, he burst into life. The group had been discussing abuse at home. Belittling, name-calling, and gas-lighting; often leading to violent assaults. Fake affection used as an excuse for inappropriate touching. The defilement that often followed. There was nothing overtly graphic or revealing. Just acknowledgment of the traumatic things that happened. How they still caused nightmares. Ruined relationships. Destroyed futures. Mixed up feelings that were difficult to make sense of. In the midst of their vulnerability, Colin dropped a bomb.

'I'd love to rape a woman', he declared, leaning back in his chair, and folding his arms across his chest. The room fell silent. Most of the group stared in disbelief. Colin looked pleased with himself and continued to speak, 'I mean, look at that footballer. Rich. Successful. He raped a woman. I was so glad he did. It must feel great. I want to be like him one day.'

The room erupted into chaos. Two of the girls walked out in tears. Others stayed and shouted at Colin. Holly walked behind his chair, resting her hands on the back. It looked like she might try to strangle him or break his neck. She leant in,

so her mouth was very close to his ear, 'You sick little bastard.' Then she walked out, shaking her head.

Ariran was irate. 'This boy shouldn't be here. It's totally inappropriate.'

The lead psychTech turned to Colin, 'Why do you think you felt the need to say that, Colin? Are you deliberately trying to upset people? Do you feel frightened, is that the cause of your aggression?'

Ariran protested, 'You can't be serious! How can you let this continue as though nothing has happened? You need to get this lad out of here. Take it up in his individual sessions. For fuck's sake! There'll be no trust in here again.'

Colin sat back in his chair, sporting a broad, reptilian grin. Thick drool oozed from the corner of his mouth—a side effect from antipsychotics. His sunken, dead eyes flicked from face to face. Observing expressions. Analysing how much distress he'd caused. Looking for signs of weakness. 'I'm only being honest', he said with an awkward wave of his giant hand. 'We're supposed to be honest, right? I think rape is good. Look at Ariran, he's ace. I really like Ariran, and he wouldn't be here if his dad hadn't raped his mum.'

For someone who appeared to have low intelligence, Colin was proving a predatory genius. Ariran lost his temper in a flash. He jumped to his feet, sending his chair tumbling backwards. 'I'm going to fuck you up, Colin. You're a fucking monster. I'd do time to wipe you off the face of this planet, you fucking freak.'

'Yeah? You northerners are all the same. Thugs. I'm glad you can't get serviToil. You're worthless. You should all be wiped off the face of the planet, not me. You haven't got the guts anyway, you wimp', he grinned, casually tapping his baseball cap with his index finger.

Ariran lurched, ready to attack, but managed to stop himself.

'I think you'd better leave', said the lead psychTech, looking at Ariran.

'Me?'

'You know swearing is against group rules. Please leave. Go

for a walk or something and cool down.'

'Are you fucking kidding me? Swearing is against the rules, but saying *rape is good* is okay?'

'Please, Ariran. You need to leave before this gets any more serious.'

'You people have lost the plot. Totally lost the plot!' He stormed out of the room, attempting to slam the door, but it was fitted with a soft closer.

Nearly all the girls refused to attend group psychTalk again. Ariran continued to go. He wanted to see if Colin was truly the monster he appeared to be, or whether there were deeper reasons for his bullying behaviour. Colin revealed nothing in group. But in private, he told Ariran a few things. The giant kid said he'd assaulted his father several times. He often pushed his mother around. They were afraid of him. Desperate to have him admitted for long-term inpatient treatment. Mainly to get him out of the house. They wanted their prenatal lives back, no longer willing to take responsibility for their creation. He said he'd been most disruptive after his arrests. He broke into neighbour's houses to steal ladies' underwear. Twice he'd been caught red-handed. No charges were brought. His father serviToiled for the government. Well-connected. He threatened to have funding withdrawn for the community if they refused to take his son in for treatment and 'fix' him.

Colin's behaviour disturbed Ariran's sleep. Most nights, he took newspapers or magazines to bed and read them out loud. Cover to cover. Refused to stop. When Ariran did eventually fall asleep, he would often wake suddenly to find Colin walking around in the dark, or slamming drawers for no reason. After making several complaints, Ariran was moved out of the room. It seemed unfair. Colin should have been moved. It was like Mother and Tenebray all over again. Almost. His new room was in the female area of the building. Several had left due to Colin's behaviour. There was an empty room there. When a male bed became free, he would be moved again. Meanwhile, he had a room to himself.

One night, while dreaming of Clara, he woke in his new bed

to find Colin standing over him, carving knife in hand. Ariran quickly decided he had two options. Attack Colin and disarm him, or try to diffuse the predicament through talking. Despite Colin's considerable size advantage, Ariran felt confident he could take him in a fight. He was faster, fitter, smarter, and more used to fighting, having grown up with an elder sibling. Colin was big, clumsy, slow, and an only child. But he was also armed and standing up, and Ariran was lying down with nothing but a pillow to hand. He gripped a corner of the pillow tightly, ready to use it as a shield, but his gut told him Colin was no danger. The creep could have slit Ariran's throat while he slept. And for all his aggressive talk and threatening manner, Ariran had never seen Colin physically assault or touch anybody. The only people he knew he'd hit were his parents. It was fear he wanted, not blood.

'Colin, what are you doing with that knife?'

'I'm going to kill you. I'm going to stab you', he chuckled, awkwardly stroking the brim of his blue baseball cap. 'I'll put you out of your suicidal misery, since you don't have the guts to do it yourself.'

Ariran raised his eyebrows. 'No you're not.'

'Why, who's going to stop me?'

'Young man, you're not going to stab anyone, and you'll put that knife back where it belongs. Where exactly did you get it from?'

'From the kitchen of course, you thicko northerner. And no, I won't put it back.'

'Colin, put the knife down now. You're being very naughty. I thought we were friends, but I'm not sure I want to be friends if you're going to behave like this.'

'You thought we were friends?'

'Yes.'

'Liar.'

'No, really ... and friends don't threaten each other in the middle of the night with knives, do they?'

'No, I guess not. I'll put the knife under my pillow. Just until the morning', he said, smiling like a lizard. He wanted Ariran to spend the night knowing he still had the knife. That

he could return anytime.

Ariran jumped out of bed and stood close to Colin. 'NO! You will NOT keep the knife under your pillow! You'll take it back NOW and put it away.'

Colin turned on his heels and ran from the room. There were loud thuds on the staircase as his heavy feet stomped down toward the kitchen. Ariran heard a faint clatter as the knife was replaced with the others.

At breakfast, Marjorie approached Ariran for a chat. 'You are going to talk about Colin in the meeting, aren't you?' Her beehive hairdo quivered as she spoke.

'Yes, Marjorie, I've asked for it to be the first thing on the agenda.'

'It's just, I heard him last night ... I'd gone to the toilet and I heard him. He was threatening to stab you. I locked myself in.'

Ariran nodded. 'Thank the lord! A witness. At least I have a witness. Yes, he did threaten to stab me. It was a bit frightening.'

'Bloody hell! Frightening! That's an understatement. I was frightened enough, and I wasn't even with you. We barricaded ourselves in our room for the night. You must've been terrified?'

'Well, kind of, but, no ... I'm not sure he's got it in him really, he's like a big kid.'

'An *enormous* kid with a *huge* knife. That's one hell of a gamble you took! But I-we thought you handled it ever so well.'

'Thanks. I guess so. It's not like I'm trained for that sort of thing.'

'So long as you're okay and will report it. I'm putting in a complaint. I can't feel safe knowing there's someone prepared to wander around with a knife at night.'

The incident with the knife was discussed in depth. The staff tried to reframe the incident. Avoid its severity. Ariran was diplomatic. He showed understanding over Colin's behaviour. But he also made it clear that when he'd agreed to join the program, he'd not agreed to put up with someone

waking him up in the middle of the night and threatening murder. The other patients were unanimous in condemning Colin's behaviour. Some began to report further incidents they'd previously brushed under the carpet. A pattern emerged. Colin was systematically finding people when they were alone. Acting in a hostile and threatening manner. Often physically intimidating them but never crossing the line. It was a sport for him.

The staff stopped trying to resist. Overwhelmed by the weight of evidence, a decision was made to discharge Colin. They found him a self-contained flat in a housing project. Assisted living for people with severe behavioural problems. The director of the community had been able to prepare a full report detailing Colin's behaviour, confirming his unsuitability for treatment and the need for a residential placement. Evidence he wouldn't have had if Colin had been refused admission from the outset. It was evidence he could produce if a certain father began to make waves about the fact that the community had been unable to 'fix' his son. Ariran wished Colin well on the day he left, but hoped he would never see him again.

22. Georgina

'So. This is our final talk together, Ariran. You've done well here.'

'You think so, Sofie? I'm not sure.'

'Don't you think you've changed?'

'Sure. Time does that anyway.'

'You used to talk fondly of the place. Don't you think you'll miss it?'

'A bit. But it's time to go now. Time to face whatever's out there.'

'That sounds ominous. What do you think you might find?'

'Pain. Servitude. Cruelty.'

'What about fun? Love? Connection?'

'Yeah. I get it. I'm being all negative. On balance, it's been good here. I learned a lot about myself, and the things that help me thrive. I learned I could enjoy life sometimes. But, the truth is, it's always taken away. Like Clara. Like this. You've been my rock for a year. You know my story like nobody else. Now I'm never going to see you again. It's like part of me is dying. I know if I find anything worthwhile in the future, I'll lose it at some point. And as for love, I'm done.'

'It still hurts, eh?'

'I never want to go through that again.'

'You know. Maybe the time you had with Clara was special. Is it worth holding on to that experience? Your pain only shows how human you are. How much you care. Don't you think it's worth fighting to keep that part of you alive? It might not seem like it now, but it's not impossible that you could find that sort of joy again.'

'Maybe.'

'Do you have any plans in place?'

'Not really. I'm back at Mother's house. That fills me with dread. I'd like to get into theatre. No idea where to start,

really.'

'That sounds good. You could find a drama group, or a college course?'

'Yeah. I guess. I'll have to see.'

'Do you have friends where you live?'

'Most have gone to uniTech now. There's a few still around. I'll try to meet up with them and have a catch-up. It's just hard thinking of what to talk about. My whole life has been this place for a year. It's kind of embarrassing. Not that I'm ashamed. But, well, they don't talk about things like we do here.'

'Do they know you've been here?'

'Yeah, but it's a bit awkward. The odd time I've seen them on my weekends home, we haven't mentioned it. They don't know what to say. I don't know what to say. We just act like we used to. Except they're doing stuff they can talk about. Jobs, degrees, football matches. All that sort of thing. Mostly, I listen.'

'I see. Well, you might have tough times, but I'm sure you'll find fulfilment, Ariran. And don't forget, if you need help in the future, ask for it.'

The following day, Ariran returned home. Despite the challenges he'd faced, and the sadness he carried from losing Clara, he couldn't deny that he felt excited about the future. Community living had helped him understand himself and how people work. It was a different world. A place where a man could sob his heart out in a room full of people. Even when he was at his worst, he couldn't recall a single day there when he didn't have a deep, heart-felt chat with someone. It felt real. Plus, the clean living and regular swimming had helped his injuries improve considerably. He'd even been able to kick a football again, albeit with pain and stiffness afterwards.

Within days of arriving home, much of his progress was undone. Ariran began to shift back into a shadow being. From seeing dozens of people every day, now he saw nobody. Except Mother. But to her, he was never more than the projection of an idea in her head. He could see it more clearly

than ever. And if reality clashed with her perception, reality lost out. He was just her womb-toy. She should have stuck to dolls and teddy bears. If he wanted to stay whole, he had to get out of there as soon as possible. For that, he needed money.

At the serviToil centre, he discovered he qualified for extra help. They offered him a theatre production course. A government-backed training scheme. It seemed like a dream come true. The course was supposed to cover a broad range of things. Acting skills. Sound and lighting. Rehearsal management. Touring. Booking and contracts. It led to nothing. Most of the time he was sat in a cold, damp room copying notes from a white board. They only spent one day in a real theatre. After six months, he was given a certificate and sent on his way. No career advice. No real experience. No serviToil placements. Forty started the course, seven finished. Only two of them found serviToil. One guy, whose uncle worked in costume design, was taken on as a stagehand. And a girl, who'd made contacts dealing bush and blow. She got work in a nightclub, stage-managing strippers. Both unpaid internships requiring them to be on their feet all day and night. Ariran had no such useful contacts. Besides, he couldn't manage being on his feet all day every day with his injuries. And working for no pay wouldn't get him out of Mother's.

It transpired that most government training schemes were a sham. Part of a ploy to reduce the numbers without serviToil before a coming election—they didn't count you while you were training. Course providers were paid a hefty sum for their services too.

Ariran sank deeper into the tarry pit of existential dread. Compared with the psychTalk community, relationships in the real world were artificial. Nobody talked about anything meaningful. Everyone was pretending. Simulating life. Their fakery suffocated any possibility for authenticity. Souls maimed through gamified serviToil, alcohol, advertising, and soap operas.

On returning to the serviToil centre, he was assigned to

another training course. Four weeks of call centre preparation. It wasn't optional, as the lady at the serviToil centre explained, 'You see Ariran, the days when you could spend time trying to find serviToil you want to do, something you might find fulfilling and enjoy, those days are long gone. You can't turn down the opportunities we provide. Not without repercussions.'

'Opportunity? I don't see it as an opportunity, no more than an invite to jump into a deep, muddy hole would be an opportunity. I've no desire to serviToil in a call centre. Besides, isn't forcing someone to serviToil, when they don't want to, a form of slavery?'

'Now, come on, don't be so childish, we all have to play our part.'

'Play a part in what?'

'The bigger picture. Society. Help the country succeed.'

'Help the country succeed in doing what? I mean, what's the bigger picture?'

'Oh, no wonder they say common sense is so rare these days.'

'What exactly is it that you're saying? What is the grand project?'

'Prosperity lad. Don't you want to make the world a better place?'

'By doing something that makes me miserable? I mean, if most people end up doing something they hate, how does that make the world a better place? It's mystifying. You know, some of the happiest people in the world are also the poorest. We don't really need more, there's plenty enough for everyone several times over. We need to use what we have in a better way.'

'Look, leave the politics for the ballot box. Let me put it this way, you don't want to sponge off others for the rest of your life, do you?'

'Leave the politics? What do you think you're doing? You're doing politics now. You're telling me there's a grand vision and I have to fit in with it, even though you don't seem to know what it is. If that's not childish, I don't know what is. And

sponge? Come on! I didn't choose to be born into this world, you know. Where's my birthright? Where is my choice to live freely on the land and provide for myself if I don't want to take part in this sham society?'

'Well, I guess you can ask your mother about that. Living in the wild isn't very nice you know, that's why we built civilization in the first place.'

'Civilization? That's what you call it! Maybe living wild isn't your cup of tea, maybe it isn't easy, but it would still be a choice. You're giving me no choice, and if there's no choice, then it's coercion. Force. Slavery. Plain and simple.'

'I really don't have time for this. There are plenty of homeless out there who don't want our help. Feel free to join them.'

'That's not living in the wild. I'm talking about living in the wilderness. Building a house from stone and wood. Fishing, hunting, gleaning from nature. The things we were born to do.'

'And where do you think we'd all go and do that? You think millions of people can wander about in this country spending all day chopping down trees and fishing?'

'No. We did that already and look where it got us. If we'd kept the numbers down, behaved in a *civilized* manner, maybe it wouldn't have been so bad. Really, it's not about practicalities, it's about ontology. If we just act like survival and reproduction machines, units of serviToil and consumption, things will only get worse. Anyway, the state of this country and the size of its population are nothing to do with me. That's a consequence of the irresponsibility of those who went before, and those who continue their legacy. I'm talking about freedom, real freedom, to live independently, free from the state, a denizen, a truly free man. I don't expect, or want, anybody else to follow suit, but I want the option for myself.'

'If you want freedom, you've come to the wrong place. This is a serviToil centre. If you don't want our help, you don't have to accept it, but there'll be repercussions.'

'There you go again. If I don't have to accept it, why are

there repercussions? I *am* being forced to accept it.'

'For the will of the greatGlow! You people make me sick.'

'Resorting to insults? You know I'm right. You know it! You know why there's a citizen's fund? It's our share. Originally, it was a share of the land. The land people relied on for subsistence. Land taken by force. Stolen by greedy, pompous men using violence and trickery. That paltry payout originated as a sweetener for being robbed of indigenous, intergenerational land rights. It's not a handout, it's compensation! And now they've dumbed everyone down. Made them forget their history.'

'My, my. Very lofty. Big words 'n' all. You should have no problem finding serviToil, smart boy. Look, this has gone on long enough. I'm not here for thinking or debate, I have serviToil to do. Now, do you want me to put you on this course or not?'

'I guess so, seeing as how I don't really have a choice.'

'Fine.'

To pursue his goal of getting away from Mother, Ariran's values and sense of justice had to die. Training involved learning cheap telesales techniques through mock telephone calls to the other 'learners'. It required even fewer props than the sparsely equipped theatre course. A few tables in a formerly disused warehouse. They didn't even have real phones. Trainees were instructed to simulate a phone by holding their hands to their ears with thumb and little finger extended. For this, the government paid the training company four thousand maudaTech per person.

During the course, it was announced that a new call centre was opening in a business park nearby. Conveniently, the owners of the training company also had a financial stake in the new business. Effectively, they were being paid handsomely by the taxpayer to train their own future staff, and they got additional tax breaks for employing them too. This was how the new mahiThist empire operated. They took money from everyone and redistributed it to the owners of private enterprises where obscenely rich, lazy people could accumulate most of it. A practice euphemistically known as

investment. Those not in the club were forced to serve. Banal serviToil and a fierce struggle to survive. The citizen's fund was reduced to the bare minimum. Just enough to stop widespread civil unrest. They planned to get rid of it once the populace was completely divided and devoid of all historical perspective.

People were desperate for money. People like Ariran who wanted to get on and live life. Get their own space. Buy their own food. Pay their own way. People who had no alternative. It was a form of behaviourism aimed at mental colonization. Personal beliefs were unimportant. You could think what you liked. Say what you liked. You just couldn't live as you liked. You had to live according to mahiThist doctrine. The old rebels who had demanded respect, dignity, and meaning, had been broken by economic manipulation, legislation, poliTech truncheons, and relentless dehumanizing propaganda.

Even as a child, Ariran knew the regime was based on lies. Bustling rows of shops with regular customers, and tight social relations, disappeared. The cold metal of supermarket trolleys and industrial whirr of conveyor belts popped up in their place. Friendly chats on the street gave way to aggressive disinterest and vicious feuds over parking spaces. These changes were obvious, but a bigger transformation happened deep down, unseen. As banal utilitarianism suffused every area of existence, the essence of being was erased. A cold, black glacier spreading slowly over a once vibrant forest. Most kutKish were oblivious. They explained their changing world by swapping preprogrammed tropes on street corners and around tables laden with mind-numbing alcohol. Petulant, ritual exchanges between traumatized battery hens, squawking and pecking at seedless husks.

In his younger days, Ariran thought change was possible. By his second suicide attempt, when he jumped, he'd long given up the idea. The psychTech community made him think again. They were doing it. An entirely different way of life. Everybody working together. Dining together. Cleaning together. There were no luxuries. No alcohol. No clubbing. No drugs. No holidays. No restaurants. Any clothes he bought

were from charity shops. If you got a hole in your sock, you went to sewing club and repaired it. He didn't own a car or even a bicycle. None of them did. It was no utopia, there were plenty of arguments and bad times. Yet, he'd felt real. Valued. Seen. At least for a while.

Being back in the outside world crushed his heart completely. In a way, it was worse because he knew the world at large was the one that was truly insane. The only way he could survive was by earning enough to get his own little box to live in. A place he could live out his life, away from all the crazies, especially Mother. If he was lucky, he might find a kindred spirit to share his little box with.

On completing training, Ariran was invited to a job interview. It was a breeze. Anybody with a basic grasp of speaking and counting, and who'd managed full attendance while training, was offered serviToil. Part-time. Selling insurance. Desk-based. Starting salary of four hundred maudaTech. Not enough to get out of Mother's. But he stuck with it and, after several months, was made full-time. A place of his own would soon be within reach.

His dream for the future salved the pain of daily life. The dull repetition. Toilet breaks counted and timed. Staring at a screen all day. He didn't even have the autonomy of choosing when to answer the phone. Headset on, voices appeared in his ear automatically, announced by a short bleep. When the call ended, he had two minutes to add notes, print paperwork, and breathe. Then the next call came. Anything that took longer went unfinished. There was no way of catching up.

In the mornings, he was sick with anxiety, fearing the coming day. During work, he lived in dread. The bleep in his ear. The angry voices. The crap jokes. Banal banter. Never any time to stop and relax. In constant fear that he'd need to take a crap at the wrong time of day, or for too long—if he held them in, he got constipated. By the day's end, he was exhausted. All he could do was recuperate for another round against an unbeatable opponent.

When George joined the company, she'd intended for it to be a stop-gap after finishing her degree. After a few months

working there, she lost her spark. Submitted to the company treadmill. Like Ariran, all her tomorrows were filled with anxiety. Except those that fell on the weekend. She did what she had to do on weekdays, and whatever the hell she wanted at the weekend. Mostly nothing. She lost the capacity to plot her escape. Thinking about the future was too painful.

Ariran took a shine to George. She was down-to-earth. Unconcerned with glamour. Wore the same denim jacket regardless of the weather. Drank beer by the jug. Like him, she was surviving life, trying to protect the spark within. She wouldn't tramp on people to climb a ladder of shit. His kind of woman. When they passed in the corridor, he'd say hello. She replied with a big smile. They rarely spoke. But there was magic in their moment of connection. He wanted to ask her out but heard she was already taken.

In time, Ariran found serviToil in another company. Similar pay, better conditions. A pension. A canteen. A gym. A more diverse role with real prospects for the future. Slavery with frills. He'd had flings with a few colleagues but was still intrigued by George. She seemed special somehow, so he decided to make a move on his leaving night.

When he arrived at the bar, there was quite a gathering. His colleagues used any excuse for a piss-up. After an hour, George and a small group of friends came to say goodbye. They were moving on to a rock club. Ariran was surrounded by people. He'd only had two drinks. It wasn't enough. So he watched with sadness as she walked out into the rain. A couple of hours later, he left his own leaving party and went to the rock club alone.

Trying to find George in the dark, smokey throng was impossible. Eventually, the music stopped and the lights came up. The club was closing. Resigned to failure, Ariran went outside. It was still pelting down with rain. He found a nearby doorway to shelter in and lit a cigarette. And there she was. Stumbling along the road in her denim jacket. Soaked to the skin.

'George!'

'Oh, hi, Ariran, what are you doing here?'

'Just fancied a change. I'd had enough of dance music.'

'Yeah, me too, I can't stand it.'

'Look, I'm glad I saw you, I ... er ... I have to tell you something.'

'Oh?'

'Yeah, it's awkward because I know you have a boyfriend and—'

'No. I don't have a boyfriend.'

'You don't?'

'Not for at least six months.'

'Oh, well, in that case.' Ariran grabbed the lapels on her denim jacket and pulled her close, kissing her lips passionately. She let him. But she kissed back like a dying fish. He put it down to her being drunk and tired. 'George, can I get your number? I'd like to take you out some time.'

'Sure.'

Ariran handed her a pen. She wrote on the cuff of his white shirt.

The following week, he started his new serviToil and began dating George regularly. Mostly they went out drinking. Once a week, then twice, then three times.

'My dad used to call me Georgina. I hate it.'

'Oh, what happened with your dad?' asked Ariran.

'I want to be called George, okay?' she snapped.

'Okay, I can do that. I was only wondering why. Georgina is a pretty name.'

'I just want to be called George. Do you think you can manage that?'

'How about Georgie?'

'Asshole.'

'Okay, we'll settle for George.' Ariran winked and smiled. But he wondered why she hated her name so much. She'd told him her father abandoned the family home when she was young. One day he was there, the next he was gone. Was that pain still so raw, or was there more to it? It troubled him. And it wasn't just the name. She had an extensive list of petty foibles. She hated fresh strawberries, fish, cheese, unless it was melted cheese, tomatoes, except ketchup and the smooth

tomato paste they put on pizza. She also disliked spice, more from lack of exposure than in response to experience. Besides food, her most infuriating trait was indecision. And there was that empty, dirty, hamster cage he found under her bed when they were first courting.

George lived in a shared house with people of similar age. Ariran would usually stay over after their nights out. Bringing her home to Mother's was unthinkable. It was during one of his stopovers that Ariran spied the hamster cage. They were both lying on the floor, naked, in the dark. He wanted to try something new, but was disappointed to find she wasn't very adventurous. Embarrassed and distracted, he peered at the host of dark shadows under the bed. There was a lot of stuff. Boxes. Bags. Pictures. Books. Candles. Something made of metal.

Their sexual experiment ended unsuccessfully. Frustrated, Ariran told George he would finish himself off. She climbed back into bed, fell asleep, and started snoring. The sound caused Ariran to abandon his orgasm. He lay on the bed, staring at the pattern of light made by a streetlamp shining through a small gap above the curtains.

The next morning, while George was downstairs making coffee, Ariran took the opportunity to look under the bed properly. There was a small cage there. He dragged a few objects clear and pulled it out. The sawdust was covered in droppings. It smelled bad, like stale urine. Disgusting! Then George walked in carrying the coffee.

'What's this?' Ariran asked.

George looked annoyed and tried to push the cage back under the bed with her foot.

'Hang on,' he protested, 'why have you got a dirty cage under your bed?'

George let out a deep sigh. 'He died. I haven't got around to dealing with it yet. We were really close. I was so upset. I just pushed it under and forgot about it, sorry.'

'Oh ... er ... sorry to hear about that. When did he die?'

'Frankie. The hamster was called Frankie. It was a few weeks, let me see, well, I guess it's about six, seven, months,

maybe a little longer.'

'Oh. How did Frankie die?'

'Just died. You know. My ex-boyfriend found him.'

'How long did you have him?'

'Hmmm, well, I guess about a year, maybe less.'

'Ah, such a short life. What a shame. Where is the hamst- Frankie now?'

'I buried him in the park, near the duck pond.'

'Right. That's sad. Look, I have to get going, I'll call you.'

Ariran drove home in a daze. It was only a hamster cage. Nothing to get hung up about. But it was a dirty hamster cage. It had been there for months. This girl seemed closed up about everything. Closed up about her dad. About her name. About a dead pet. And she kissed like a dying fish, whether drunk or sober. It was all shut and clutter. He didn't understand how a grown woman couldn't deal with a dirty animal cage. And the amount of other stuff hoarded under the bed was awful. Signs of a blocked, irrational mind. A lack of self-awareness. Any future with this woman was going to be difficult. He had to break up. Then he remembered Clara. The pain and regret.

Rationalizing his fears away, Ariran decided to give it a bit longer. George had been grieving, after all. It was nice that she cared so much about little things. Better than not giving a damn. She only had a small room in a shared house. He could see how she might have pushed the cage away and forgotten about it. Still, the image of the dirty cage full of droppings kept appearing in his mind. He wondered how many times he'd slept above it? Twenty, thirty. Ugh! Maybe it was a sign of the trauma. Her father walking out. Perhaps other darker things had happened. Things she hadn't told him. She was a good person but damaged. He could relate to that. No, he couldn't walk out of this relationship. He would help her save herself from her demons. She could truly blossom if he nurtured and cared for her. This time, with George, he'd go with his feelings, not his reason.

23. Domesticate

Living with someone is the only way you really get to know them. One of the first things Ariran noticed was that George couldn't cook. Even toast got burnt. Every time. He'd have to open all the windows of their small riverside flat to let the smell out. To begin with, he did most of the cooking. When he first made stir-fry, George's reaction astonished him.

'Won't it go on fire?' she asked worriedly.

'Have you never used a wok before?'

'No.'

'Didn't you tell me you did home economics?'

'I did, top grade too.'

'Well, what did you learn, I thought you did cooking?'

'Oh, only baking. It wasn't really about cooking anyway, more about running a home.'

'Oh, I see', Ariran chuckled.

'What's funny?'

'Have you really never used a wok?'

'No, never.'

'Frying pan?'

'No ... well, maybe once or twice. I mean, there was the time I set fire to the ceiling trying to cook bacon.'

'Bacon? How have you managed to feed yourself all these years?'

'Mum cooked when I was at home and, when I moved out, I just ate pasta, noodles, microwave food, bagged salads, that sort of thing. And I got a lot of takeaways, as you well know.'

'Yeah, you and your kebabs and chips.'

'Oi! I wasn't the only one eating it you know.'

'So, not being funny, but what did you learn in home economics about running a home if you didn't learn basic cooking skills?'

'Well, it was about budgeting and planning and stuff.'

'But exclusively for cakes?'

'And biscuits.'

Ariran hadn't fallen for George because of her wizardry in the kitchen, but he worried about how childish she seemed. It wasn't limited to cooking. George didn't wash the dishes so much as tickle them with a damp cloth. No concept of microbiology. There were always bits left stuck to things, sometimes really obvious stuff like greasy tomato streaks on plates, or clods of butter on knife handles. She got terribly upset when Ariran pointed it out. He often had to wash the dishes all over again. There was the vacuuming too. George didn't vacuum underneath anything. Not the table, the couch, the bed, or the rug. That's why she'd failed to notice the dead hamster cage for so long. It was as though she could only deal with what was immediately visible. Nothing else existed.

When it came to polishing, George was all spray and no elbow grease. Everything became dull looking with a sticky residue. He had to finish that job too. The list started to mount up. She didn't clean the oven, ever. She left the top off the toothpaste every day. He'd replace it, wash the top of the tube, and clean away the lump of paste she'd left stuck to the side of the sink. In the bedroom, she always left her drawers stuffed to bursting with random bits of clothing sticking out, like it was trying to escape. When Ariran tried to tidy them, he found pencils, makeup, spent batteries, and old photographs, randomly mixed with crumpled blouses, jumpers, and bras.

Had George's habits been minor annoyances that only affected her life, they wouldn't have been so troublesome. But Ariran's life was becoming significantly less pleasant and more stressful than necessary. Every move he made in the flat meant having to deal with some unnecessary obstacle. A hidden mess or half-finished job. Bags dumped in doorways. Shoes left on stairs. Belts and scarves discarded on the floor like snake skin. Just the sight of chaos and clutter was enough to drain his energy. However, he also came to understand that these annoyances were an indication of something more deeply problematic.

Like Mother, George lacked depth in her conscious

awareness. She was unable to engage with the fullness of the present moment. Hence, she was incapable of engaging with the whole, real Ariran. It resulted in an unintentional disregard for the experiential quality of his life. After all, what is a person but a cumulative sequence of experiences? And if some external factor makes those experiences unpleasant, it changes the very essence of the experiencer. It takes a little extra effort to ensure that plates are properly clean. A bit more attention and focus to replace the cap on the toothpaste. A desire for orderliness to not stuff drawers full of surplus junk. These weren't perfectionist gripes. They were about awareness. A simple understanding that a tidy, uncluttered room creates a more pleasant and less stressed person than a dusty, chaotic one.

Arguably worse than George's uncouth habits was finding their conversation dry up. Ariran wondered what they'd talked about on all those nights out. From what he could recall, it was mostly stories about their past. But all the stories had been told. There was nothing left to say. They shared no other interests save for the basic functions of life—eating, drinking, shitting, and sleeping. George had feigned interest in art, movies, and books when they were courting. Now she seemed bored by anything he liked. He felt angry with himself. Who had he fallen in love with? Had it really been love? Did love even exist? He pushed such impossible questions out of his mind, instead focusing on practical matters. After all, they'd signed a twelve-month lease. Neither of them could afford to bail. Maybe if George was a bit tidier, things would get better.

'George, could you please put the top on the toothpaste after using it, and clean up that dollop you keep leaving in the sink? Oh, and please wash the dishes properly, I keep having to wash them all over again. And the hoovering. Could you reach underneath things like I do, it would really help ease my allergies?'

'Yeah, sure', she replied, with a shrug.

'Great, thanks. It would really help me out if you did. Is there anything you'd like me to do?'

'Can't think of anything.'

‘Okay. If you do, let me know. Listen, George, I'm worried about you, do you want to talk about anything?’

‘I'm fine’, she said curtly, looking down at her shoes.

‘It's just. Well, it seems like your mind is always elsewhere. Is there something troubling you?’

‘No. Why do you have to get all psychological all the time?’

‘I'm just trying to talk to you, that's all.’ Ariran realized he was making no headway, so he went to make tea. As he mashed George's teabag, he wondered if he should have made the tea beforehand. Then he felt angry. Why was he lumbered with the micromanagement of their relationship? He wasn't her parent. They were supposed to be equals. He flung the teabag into the bin. She would have dumped it on the edge of the sink.

Nothing changed. The toothpaste lid was left off. He found a large slice of onion stuck to a ‘washed’ fork in the cutlery tray. George even managed to lose the metal cap off a pepper grinder. It turned up in his dinner. An insipid Bolognese with water-sodden spaghetti. The tooth he chipped required a visit to the dreaded toothTech. Ariran took it as an unconscious act of anger. Again, he thought about leaving, but was tormented by flashbacks. The moment he was told Clara had died. There had been magic with Clara. A sparkle his relationship with George lacked. Clara's flat was clean and uncluttered. Their conversation was always lively. The silences, comfortable and homely. That sort of love would never be possible again. He'd ruined his chance. Beer brought respite. After necking a four-pack, he could live in George's world more comfortably. Maybe in time she would open up. Relationships were hard work. He just needed more patience.

24. Dance

Years passed. George and Ariran settled into a pattern. She pretended to do some chores. He did, or redid, all the housework weekly. Friday night, they rented a video and ordered takeaway. Like clockwork, halfway through the movie, George fell asleep. On Saturday, they had breakfast in bed, perfunctory sex, went shopping, did some washing, and then went to the pub. On Sunday, they mooched around the flat nursing hangovers. If Ariran began losing his temper over George's bad habits, or felt an empty gnawing in his heart, a sensation that told him to leave her, he drank beer. He drank beer most evenings.

The two of them remained on low pay. Once the rent and bills were paid, there was nothing left to save for a deposit on a house. Ariran decided they needed a holiday. They had no money for that either, so he got himself a credit card. He reasoned that it wasn't reckless. He was taking care to invest in their relationship. Their future. Besides, it was only a few hundred maudaTech.

The plane descended over the skies of the romantic city one sunny day in late March. George pointed out the main landmarks below. In the taxi, she continued to name streets, bars, and famous buildings. They arrived at the hotel. Cream-coloured. Six floors. Ornate, iron balconies. Carefully carved stonework. They were allocated a delightful room at the top. It had large windows that opened inwards, revealing a narrow balcony overlooking the busy street below. George fetched a bottle of red wine, a stick of bread, and a warm round cheese from a local store. Food and drink was one of the few things she got truly excited about, so long as she wasn't the one preparing it.

The romantic city reminded her of happy childhood

holidays and her time as a student. In comparison with life back home, the mood was magical. Feeling adventurous, Ariran stripped off in front of the open window, then lay on the bed seductively.

'What *are* you doing, Ariran?' George giggled nervously.

'Madame, why don't you come and find out?'

'But I haven't finished my cheese.'

'Finish your cheese. Enjoy the view. I can wait.'

She munched her cheese and bread. Washed it down with wine. Coyly approached the bed. Ariran tried to undress her. The tiny buttons on her clothes were awkward. She sat motionless, looking bored. It took him an age to get each of those tiny plastic circles out from the tight cloth slits. Eventually, he got down to her blouse and peeled it away. He felt like a father getting a child ready for bed. The passion in his loins began to fade. Even here, on a perfect day, in one of the most romantic cities on the planet, in a wonderful hotel, with great food and good humour, he still couldn't make things click. Playful jollity gave way to clumsy embarrassment. Once she was naked, he performed ten minutes of mechanical foreplay, stroked a condom on, and got on with the job. George seemed to enjoy herself. Ariran didn't. His orgasm was weak. Much less pleasurable than the cigarette he smoked afterwards. They showered separately and got ready for an evening out.

George had explored the city when she was a student. She knew of places locals frequented. Most were tucked away, hidden from the casual tourist. It wasn't long before she spotted a small wine bar up a narrow side street. A plain burgundy canopy, adorned with ornate gold lettering. Mirrored windows. At a glance, it looked like a jewellery store. The interior was rustic. Candles wedged into empty wine bottles. Scattered tables occupied by lonely old men. Rouged noses. Cheap red wine in thumb-sized glasses. George was talkative. A fast, rhythmic chatter, embellished with lively hand gestures. She spoke about her days as a student. How she could organize an entire day based on various happy hours. Where she found the best street food. Ways of staying

out as long as possible so she could avoid the cockroaches that crawled the walls in her downbeat bedsit. He got a glimpse of who she'd been, before the call centre stole her soul.

Next stop was an eriNis bar. A young man was performing cover songs on his acoustic guitar. George and Ariran sang along. Annoying, drunken tourists. They were in great cheer when they left to find somewhere to eat. Soon, they stumbled across a byZien restaurant. They peered through the window. An unusual set-up. Several rows of long, sturdy picnic benches. Cheap, plastic tablecloths. Weird junk suspended from the ceiling. A high shelf lined with dozens of dusty, old wine bottles. It was packed. Most of the customers were young. Their clothing and hairstyles suggested they were students. The handful of older people were dressed like thothTechs. Ariran opened the door tentatively and stepped inside. A rotund waiter with a thick, black moustache, greeted them warmly, 'Welcome, welcome, come on in!'

'Hello,' Ariran smiled, 'have you a table for two?'

'One moment please.' The waiter disappeared into the kitchen through two swinging doors with porthole windows. Seconds later, he reappeared with two plates of piping hot food and presented them to two hungry-looking gentlemen. Then he hurried back. 'Thank you sir, madame, this way please. Gentlemen, would you mind making space for this lovely couple?'

The two men shuffled along to make room. George and Ariran thanked them. On the recommendation of the waiter, Ariran ordered cow tongue. His grandparents had often put tongue in sandwiches. It always tasted delicious, but what arrived on his plate took him by surprise. An inch-thick slab of whole tongue. So long, it overhung the plate on both sides. The taste buds and muscle structure were clearly discernable. He imagined it moving around inside the mouth of a living cow, tumbling balls of mushy grass. Once they were home, he would stop eating meat. George winced as he pushed the first slice into his mouth. Then she laughed. They ordered a second bottle of wine to accompany dessert and rounded the meal off

with a byZien coffee. Thick as jam. Delicious and revitalizing. Ariran left a generous tip. They wandered out into the night, hand-in-hand.

The sky was dark and clear, adorned by a bright crescent moon. It was past eleven o'clock. Ariran was full of energy. He spotted a jazz club with live music and talked George into venturing inside. Entry was expensive. The music was awful. They left disappointed. While slowly meandering back to the hotel, they heard another band. Bright and alive, in contrast to the slow, syrupy jazz they'd just endured. A cavernous drum rumbled with intent. Backbone was formed from the deep slap and thlub of an upright bass, fleshed out by a twanging, overdriven guitar. Above the rhythmic landscape flew the predatory melody of a saxophone. It swooped down with gravelly smoothness, diving into the complex, ringing harmonic of a ride cymbal. Then it rose, louder, floating, coaxing out a roll and snap from the snare. A splash on the crash cymbal. A busy, floppy stomp on the bass.

Ariran was instinctively drawn to the sound. He wandered in through the glass doors of the corner cafe. George sighed and followed. Free entry and affordable drinks. Happy days! Behind the bar was an old grandmother clock. Hands permanently pointing to midnight. They settled into a pair of rattan bistro chairs and ordered two draught beers. Ariran was enchanted. He tapped his feet and smoked several strong cigarettes in quick succession.

Suddenly, he jumped up. ‘Come on, let's dance’, he said, smiling broadly.

‘Oh, no’, replied George, shaking her head shyly.

‘Come on! Come on! You only live once you know.’ He grabbed her arm, expecting to haul her up easily. In his head, he pictured the two of them dancing. Laughing. Embracing. Kissing.

George resisted. Her arm went limp. She rooted herself to the chair. ‘No, I don't dance’, she grumped, glaring at the bottom of her beer glass. It was a definitive no. A leave-me-the-fuck-alone no. Ariran slumped into his chair, humiliated. Instantly exhausted. Time for bed.

After a lazy, sexless morning, they went to an art gallery. Despite his love of art, he felt uncomfortable in those places. There was something stagnant and forced about the way people ambled between works. Half-shuffle, half-strut. He got his fill of a special exhibition of modern abstract work, then they wandered through the plush antique corridors of the rest of the gallery. Musty old paintings. Portraits of rich fops and their dogs. Eventually, they came across a crowded room. It housed a world-famous painting. Ariran gently muscled his way through the crowd to get a closer look. A small, dull, lifeless painting of a woman. Her expression was a mixture of slight disgust and calm contentment. As though she'd broken wind. Perhaps she'd encountered one of the people her husband made his fortune from.

The macabre spectacle unsettled Ariran. The horde of people weren't there to look at the painting. They wanted to be seen to have seen it. An experiential souvenir. Anything could have been hung on the wall. A can of soup. A glass of water. A rotting potato. So long as it was famous. They were idolizing the idea of an experience, based on the idolatry of critics, who idolized an image of a woman, idolized by a man, who idolized himself on the premise of his own ethnic and class-based superiority. A fractal of bullshit. Each tourist would return from their travels and tell their friends and family they'd been there. And those friends and family would make cooing noises, twisting their faces with feigned respect. No different to chimpanzees sniffing each other's shitty fingers. Yet here he was. One more body in that throng of people. What made him so different?

He felt the urge to tear the damned painting from the wall. Smash it over his knee. Declare war against the attrition of the human soul. That would be art! But he knew the zombie mass wouldn't appreciate such an act. Neither would the local authorities. Ariran turned away from the painting and searched the crowd for George. She was standing at the back with a flat expression. He jostled his way back to her and gave her a quick cuddle.

‘That's a good painting, isn't it?’ she said in a dull tone.

'Is it?' he replied, loudly.

Nearby, a couple of chubby amuRians turned to cast eyes on the heretic. The man had a gigantic camera slung around his neck. His wife clutched a large handbag. Ariran smiled and gave a dramatic shrug, almost touching his ears with his shoulders. The man fumbled in his pocket. Retrieved a small cloth. Wiped it over the huge lens of his camera. As he polished, he glanced furtively at Ariran. A subtle dig, hinting that Ariran should uncloud his vision. But Ariran was looking with his real eye. His living eye. Not the simulated eye of a tourist.

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25. Terror

Regular trips away helped maintain the illusion of fulfilment for George and Ariran. Their true bond was grinding, routine domesticity. George put on weight. Ariran got fitter and leaner. George became a better cook. Ariran capitulated to her untidiness. Life was unnervingly peaceful. Their drudgery was interrupted by an invitation to a party. Ariran's friend, Ruby, was turning thirty.

As they walked up the driveway, the crunching gravel reminded Ariran of his LSD experience many years before. Same house. Same drive. Same gravel. Despite the trauma, he cracked a fond smile. Ruby greeted the couple at the door, then ushered them to the heart of the party, the kitchen. After mingling for a while, Ariran visited the toilet. On the way back, he bumped into Jessy in the hallway. A friend from skolOpticon he hadn't seen in years. An old crush. They reacquainted themselves. Then, she told him she was having a tough time. Her partner was having an affair. She didn't feel much like partying. They climbed a nearby staircase and sat on the top step.

Ariran listened intently. He watched too. The heave and sigh of pert breasts under a delicate, grey, cashmere jumper-dress. Very short with a low cut. Her bare legs trembled and twitched. She frequently licked her bottom lip as she spoke. A beautiful, natural, flesh lip. Unblemished by make-up or other interferences. She looked into his eyes, occasionally glancing down between her thighs to break the intensity. Her voice conveyed sadness and regret, but her eyes sparkled, and her mouth flickered into a smile.

Ariran's advice was blunt, 'Jessy, you need to leave him. He's done it once, he'll do it again.'

'But, and I know it's stupid, but I love him.'

Ariran reached out and placed the palm of his hand on her

knee. Jessy looked up and smiled. His crotch twitched. His breathing got faster. His pupils flared. He continued to speak, 'I know it's hard. I know you love him, or you'd have no doubts at this point, about leaving him, but ... what is love if not fidelity? The sacrifice of fleeting, fleshly pleasure for something more transcendent and lasting. How can you trust him? Your heart is too precious. He can't love you.'

Jessy wiped away a tear with the back of her hand and smiled. 'I know. You're right. I should leave him, but ... I love him. I do. I love him so, so much! Anyway, enough about me. You must be bored. And shouldn't you be with George?'

'It's okay. She knows loads of people here. Besides, you're upset, and I care about you.'

'Ah, come off it. You must think I'm a right stupid bitch. Look how ugly I've become. I'm a mess.'

'Jessy, I'm saying this as a friend, kind of, or, no, but you're beautiful. I love you. I will always love you regardless of what happens. Even if we never meet again.'

'But ... you're with George.'

'Shit. I said that out loud, didn't I? It's true. It's my heart speaking. Yeah, I'm with George. I guess we've both made choices we have to live with. I do love her too, in a way. But don't forget how special you are. You don't have to put up with anything or anyone you don't want to.'

'Mmm ... thanks. I think you're really handsome, by the way. As a friend, of course. And those marks on your face are incredible. They almost look like—'

'They're birthmarks', interrupted Ariran. He put his hand on his face and blushed.

'Don't cover them up, they're gorgeous. Part of you.' Jessy leant toward Ariran and gently moved his hand away from his cheek. Her touch felt electrifying. He moved closer, feeling her breath on his lips. She looked into his eyes dreamily. Then suddenly looked away. 'Oh, look, I think George is upset.' She nodded down the stairs toward the kitchen.

Ariran looked down through the bannister spindles. He could see through the open door into the kitchen. There was an empty bottle of peach schnapps on the table. Two young

women were consoling a third. It was George. She was distraught. He realized if he could see her from where he was, she could see him too. He took his hand off Jessy's thigh. Hurried downstairs. Tried to enter the kitchen casually.

'Oh, hi, George, hey, what's the matter?'

'Nothing. Where have you been?'

'Talking to Jessy on the stairs.'

'I know.'

'Oh. What's happened?'

'You left me here.'

'I was only there. You could have got me if you needed me. Is everything okay?'

'No.'

'Wha—'

'I want to go home. Now!'

The two girls, who'd been consoling George, glared at Ariran. He skulked off to the hallway to call a cab.

It was a quiet ride home. In the living room, Ariran balanced against the back of the couch to remove his shoes. George cracked. A full tornado of tears, anger, and fists. She pushed him over the back of the couch. He knocked his head on the solid teak arm. She couldn't get her words out quickly enough. The schnapps wasn't helping. Dazed, he picked himself up and moved a few steps back. A painful lump swelled up on his forehead. She wanted to shout but was mindful of how late it was. A timidity so powerful, it could repress the strongest emotions. Not wanting to disturb the neighbours, she began talking in a strange kind of shouting whisper. It sounded like a down-hill skiing contest. Distant horns punctuated by swishes of snow. Ariran couldn't understand a word, but he felt her pain. He took a chance and gave her a hug. It calmed her a little. She stopped trying to talk and fell into a gut-wrenching sob. A thick stream of mucus dribbled from her nose and down the front of his shirt.

After a few minutes, the whisper-shout started up again. 'You ... you prick ... you hu-hu-miliated me ... in front of all those people. Faaawwning aaall over JJJesssy aaall night ... I was aaaall on my own ... you l-left me aaalllll alone.'

'I'm sorry,' Ariran whispered, 'I'm sorry. Jessy was upset. She was, is, a good friend. She needed someone to talk to. I thought you were okay. I didn't realize the time.'

'It looked like moooorre thaaan talking to me.'

'No, George, I swear. I was listening—'

'What? Was y-your haaaand listening to her knee?'

'It was a way of comforting her. Look, I won't lie. I used to have a thing for Jessy. She's still a good friend. I'd had a couple of drinks. But I love you. I chose you.'

'Not tooonight you d-didn't.'

'Yes, yes I did. I told Jessy I loved you both, but I came home with you. I'm here aren't I?' Ariran swallowed hard. He knew he'd revealed too much. Stupid beer.

'Are you here? Want a fuuuccking medal?! Aaarre you with me? Ooor aaaarre you thinking of heerr? Thinking of eeescaape?'

'No. I'm here.'

'Whaaaeevver.'

George went to bed. Ariran made himself a coffee and got a bag of peas from the freezer for his head. The bitterness of their argument had brought to mind a past incident. Something he'd all but forgotten from before they moved in together.

George and Ariran were at Martin's house. He was a good friend. They'd been out and were chilling in his lounge listening to music. Martin went to fetch drinks. He was gone a long time, so George went to look for him. While she was gone, the music stopped. Ariran sat in the quiet waiting. Then he heard the unmistakable sound of wet lips smacking against wet lips. It lasted around fifteen seconds. George came back into the room. She looked guilty as hell. Her lower lip trembled. Ariran called a taxi immediately. It arrived in minutes. The two of them sat on the back seat, watching the flickering of the streetlamps amid the first signs of dawn.

'What's wrong?' asked George.

'Uh?'

'What's the matter?' she insisted, grabbing Ariran's arm.

Ariran glared at her, then looked away.

'Nothing happened,' she pleaded, 'I swear, nothing happened.'

The taxi driver caught Ariran's eye in the rearview mirror. A look of concern mixed with casual boredom. Worried that the argument might escalate. Tired of couples and their petty squabbling. Ariran smiled back wryly and raised his eyebrows. The driver fixed his eyes back on the road.

Ariran held the frozen peas to his head and sipped his coffee. He could have dumped George that night. Dropped her home in the taxi. Never seen her again. Had he done so, he might have been single at Ruby's party. Maybe he'd have taken Jessy into a bedroom. Started dating. Moved in together. Lived in bliss. Too late now. He felt like a lorry driver who'd driven several miles up a narrow road before realizing he was lost. No way of turning back. He had to press on. Hope for an opportunity to get back on track. All the while, the road narrowed, and the potholes increased in size and number.

Alcohol took precedence on George and Ariran's shopping list. Gin, whisky, wine, and beer. Mornings were foggy. Days, a blur. Evenings, a merry mess of taciturn tiddle and television. One Saturday, as they were settling in for an afternoon gin, Martin called. He was in town having a drink. They agreed to join him. Afternoon became evening. By midnight, they'd had enough and caught the last train home.

As soon as Ariran turned the corner and saw their flat, he knew. The window was closed. He'd left it ajar. A burglar had closed it on his way out. Their passports and bank statements were gone. Their entire CD collection too. George lost her grandmother's jewellery. Ariran, his great-grandfather's pocket watch.

The intrusion left him deeply perturbed. Burdened with guilt. He'd never have left the window open had he been thinking straight. He wasn't thinking straight because he was drinking so much. He was drinking so much because he was trying to forget. Forget the relentless stress of serviToil. Forget his fake relationship. Forget the fading future. Now he

remembered. But he was trapped. Trapped by exhaustion. Trapped by debt. Trapped by fear. For weeks, he barely slept. Alcohol only made the cage stronger. But he needed it more than ever. Instead of cutting down, he drank more. They both did.

A new neighbour moved into the flat upstairs. Gaunt. Private. White robe. Initially, Ariran thought the constant banging on the ceiling was prayer. It went on for hours at a time. Day in, day out. One morning, while walking outside, he looked up and saw the man through his front window. Pacing up and down. Holding a large mobile phone. No furniture in the room. No pictures on the wall. The only visible object, a strange white disk on the floor near the window. A satellite dish. Three or four feet in diameter.

Ariran tried to tolerate the thumping on the ceiling for several more weeks, but he could bear it no longer.

'Excuse me, I'm Ariran from the flat downstairs. We can hear a lot of banging. It seems to go on for a long time. Do you know what it is?'

'I don't know', the guy snapped, closing his door.

Ariran slipped his foot into the gap to stop him. 'Well, it's just that it goes on and on. We can hear it. We can feel it. The vibrations, they're bad. I mean, I'm beginning to suffer due to the noise. What are you doing?'

'I'm walking.'

'Walking?'

'Yes, walking.'

There were multiple pairs of shoes lined up in the guy's hallway. Only two looked big enough to fit him. 'Do you live alone?'

'Is that your business?'

'Well, it's the walking, if there were others—'

'To be clear. You're knocking at my door, telling me to stop walking, and asking me who I live with?'

'Well, no, it's the banging, the walking causing the banging. I don't want to stop you walking, but perhaps you could walk more gently? You'll do yourself damage stomping around like that and for so long. And when you want to go walking for a

long time, maybe you could walk outside? We have a promenade here. There are plenty of places to go walking. Do you have to do it in the flat? So hard on my ceiling? If I was walking on my ceiling the way you walk on your floor, I bet you'd have something to say about it.' Ariran glanced at the satellite dish in the guy's front room. The guy looked back. Realized it was visible.

'Okay. I will walk outside. Happy?' he snapped, kicking Ariran's foot out from the gap in his door and slamming it shut. Immediately, he returned to pacing up and down.

'I'm serious pal, you need to go outside for that', said Ariran loudly as he walked away.

It didn't make sense. Walking in bare feet shouldn't make a noise like that. It sounded like a kettle drum. The landlord must have neglected to put any sound insulation in. Every thump provoked a cascade of questions in Ariran's mind. Where was the guy's furniture? Why so many pairs of shoes, mostly the wrong size? Why was he pacing up and down? Who was on the end of the telephone? Why was he using a satellite phone and not a normal landline?

Ariran upped his alcohol consumption. Less beer and wine. More spirits. It helped him sleep. One night, after he'd drifted off in the warm glow of a bottle of single malt, he awoke with a start. The bed was sodden with sweat. A voice called from afar, 'I'M OVER HERE. I'M OOVERRR HEEERE.' He staggered out of bed and peered through a gap in the curtains. Someone was standing in the road. Rain was pounding the old stone flags. Bouncing off the head and shoulders of the figure. It looked like a man. Ariran's eyes attuned to the dark. An older man. Thick black moustache. Weathered face. Dated clothes. Dark woollen coat. Light-coloured hoops encircling the end of the sleeves.

Ariran tried to wake George, 'Quick, quick, look out the window.'

She sat up slowly, blinking her eyes.

'Quickly, quickly. There's a man shouting and waving outside, it looks like he's from the navy.'

George stared in disbelief. She was barely awake. She

didn't want to be.

'Look, look. Quickly, quickly', he insisted.

Reluctantly, she got up. Walked to the window. Peeled aside the curtain. There was nothing there. Ariran looked up and down the street. There was no sign. 'He vanished. Just like that.'

'Did you have to wake me? You need to cut down your drinking.'

'It wasn't that, George. It was real. I swear. I saw a man. If you'd been quicker, you would have seen him too.'

'I didn't realize your apparitions were so strictly time-limited.'

A week later, George and Ariran were sitting in the lounge looking out across the river. The view was the reason they'd rented the place. It was the most perfect of days. Comfortably warm. Blue sky. The slightest breeze caressed the water, rippling flecks of gold from the sun. So many sailing boats, they couldn't be counted. At four-thirty, the tide turned. By five, the boats had gone. Then Ariran saw something strange in the sky. An intensely bright, orange light, bobbing around at incredible pace. Changing speed and direction effortlessly. Covering miles in a second or less. George was making dinner in the kitchen. He called her to come quickly. This time she did. She saw what he saw. Only for a second or two. Then it vanished. George was mystified.

'What was that?' she asked Ariran.

'That, my dear, was a UFO.'

'An alien?'

'No, maybe, I don't know. Remember, the U means unidentified. I've never seen anything like it. It didn't look like it was from this world! I should have got my camera.'

'Yeah. So weird. Do you think it'll come back?'

'I've no idea. I doubt it.'

'Maybe we should both cut down on the booze?'

'You think that wasn't real? Besides, I've not touched a drop today.'

'You had a skinful last night, remember? It could be withdrawals.'

'What? Both of us at the same time?'

'Look. I don't care about your hallucinations. I don't care about UFOs. Not unless they're coming to save us. I care about not burning the dinner, so you'll have to excuse me.'

After the UFO sighting, the walking neighbour went on a trip. Ariran's anxiety reduced considerably. By the fourth day, he'd cut down to one tumbler of whisky a night. He slept better. ServiToil was less stressful. They went for a hike instead of going to the pub at the weekend. He began to feel hope again. Then the man returned. The stomping too. Worse now. It started earlier. Finished later. Ariran tried to remain calm, but rage was coursing through his blood. Venom filled his muscles. His neck and back stiffened. His joints popped and crackled. Fog choked his brain. He couldn't focus on anything. Days passed without sleep. The world dissolved. The sofa, the walls, the floor, and the ceiling became an indistinct blur. Thoughts smashed into his brain with each heartbeat. Mother. The burglary. Iggy. The ghostly figure. Clara. The UFO. Jessy. UniTech. George. Ankles. Pills. Kuu. The knife. Colin. Another knife. LSD. Mel. Guadelpo. The toothTech. Coma. Doug Havishan. Eczema. Asthma. Whisky. Stomp! Stomp! Stomp!

Ariran's vision narrowed to a tunnel. Breathing was hard. His heart pumped fast, rattling his ribs. The veins in his hands swelled up. The room began to vibrate and shimmer. Suddenly, he jumped up. Grabbed the nearest weapon he could find. A metal vacuum cleaner tube. He raced into the bedroom. Jumped on the bed. Pounded on the ceiling with the tube. Pieces of paint and plaster flaked off. He screamed so loud his lungs tore to shreds, 'SHUT THE FUCK UP YOU MORON, I'M GOING TO KILL YOU, I'M GOING TO FUCKING KILL YOU!'

George rushed to the doorway of the bedroom. She'd never seen him like this. A mass of seething anger. A killing rage. It was terrifying. The thumping stopped. Ariran stood motionless on the bed, staring at the ceiling. George stood by the door, staring at Ariran. Neither of them breathed. The walking started again. Too short a break for Ariran to wrestle

control from the lizard part of his brain. He ran toward the front door. George backed out of the bedroom doorway. She stood against the front door, blocking it with her body. Ariran tried to move her out of the way. She put all her weight against the door and locked her arms across the clasp. He would need to use real force to shift her. Even his lizard brain couldn't make him use violence against her. He retreated into the bedroom. Recommenced pounding on the ceiling. Screaming.

Eventually, he collapsed onto the bed and sobbed. The thumping stopped. There were footsteps on the stairs outside. Footsteps in the shared hallway, close to the front door. Ariran recognized the foreign accent. The walking man. He picked up the metal tube, leapt up from the bed, and ran back to the front door. George remained steadfast. She wouldn't let him pass. He backed down. Stood there shaking. George gently removed the metal tube from his hand and embraced him. They both began to cry.

'I can't take it any more, George. We have to move. I'll kill him. I swear I'm going to kill him. We have to move. Please.'

'I know. Hang in there. We'll go. We'll move.'

26. Friend

Ariran and George carried the last of their stuff to their room. Most remained in storage. They joined their old friend, Martin, in the garden. Having spent years in a flat, a barbecue was something of a novelty. Burgers. Buttered buns. Beer. The sun set. They lit a fire. Eventually, the evening chill drove them inside. George went to bed. She was looking forward to sleeping with nobody stomping around above her. Ariran stayed up watching movies with his new landlord. The beer ran out at two in the morning. Martin called a black-market delivery service. Ariran staggered to bed three hours later.

It was gone eleven the next morning when Ariran woke. George was lying in bed staring at the ceiling, anxious about making herself at home. He went to fetch some tea and toast. The kitchen was awash with empty beer cans. Martin appeared from the living room, carrying a can in his hand.

'Don't tell me you haven't been to bed?' Ariran asked.

'Werrr'll ... nooo', Martin slurred, propping himself up on the kitchen door frame, giggling into his chest. Ariran had never seen anybody so drunk. Martin pulled a cigarette box out of his back pocket. It was crushed. He examined it carefully for a few seconds, then flung it onto the kitchen worktop. He fished through his other pockets and found a second pack. Another crumpled box. The cigarette he wrestled free was squashed flat but intact. He shrugged, placed it in his mouth the wrong way round, and tried to light it. The flame swayed from side to side. He realized his error. Giggled. Flipped the cigarette around. Using both hands, he managed to guide the flame and light it. 'Ill'vve gohrt itssssokay ... what what hehehe ... what I meant to saaay was thaannkk you.'

'Martin, don't you think you're best going to bed?' asked Ariran.

Martin rocked back on his heels, shrugged, and said, ‘Naahhh.’ He staggered back into the front room.

Ariran finished making tea and toast. Took it upstairs. ‘George, you won't believe it. I knew Martin could drink, but he's still on the sauce, hasn't been to bed.’

‘No! Seriously!?’

‘Yeah, he's fucking cabbaged.’

After breakfast, George and Ariran took turns in the bathroom before venturing downstairs together. Martin was sat in the living room watching TV. The air was thick with cigarette smoke. The curtains remained drawn. George tried to make polite conversation but could make no sense of Martin's slurred ramblings. He managed to drink a further twelve cans before he put himself to bed that evening.

Martin binged every weekend. None stop. From Friday afternoon until Sunday evening. Ariran wondered what drove him to it. His childhood had been a comfortable experience. Decent friends. Large, tidy house. Two caring parents. A little strict but not abusive. He got on with his two brothers. Good exam results. Well paid serviToil. Holidays. Sexual partners. Yet still, he couldn't bare the pain of experiencing life sober. A slow suicide. Maybe the stress of serviToil, or constant existential dread. Ariran tried to put it out of mind. He was Martin's lodger, not his psychTech.

George began to get out at weekends to avoid Martin. She joined a yoga class. And a meditation class. And the local women's group. And a craft group. Ariran needed something too. He tried five-a-side football, but it caused too much pain in his ankles. A band put an ad in the local shop. They wanted a singer. He'd sung a bit when he was younger and auditioned. They weren't fussy and took him on. The guitar was so loud you could barely hear the vocals anyway. Most importantly, it got him out of the house every Saturday.

Once they'd sorted out their weekend routine, living in Martin's house was tolerable. George was so active, she began to lose weight. Ariran's singing improved. The band started playing live gigs. They were getting paid too. He began to relax more. He could sleep again. The feeling of being a true self

returned. ServiToil was manageable. They made plans to buy a house.

One dull Saturday morning, Ariran was driving to rehearsal. A journey he'd made a dozen times. He was daydreaming about the band going full-time. Wondering whether he should forget buying a house and get a van. It would be a dream, but being with George made it impossible. She wouldn't quit serviToil and go with him. She wouldn't want to stay at Martin's alone. But if the opportunity to be a full-time musician arose, there was no chance he'd turn it down. He'd choose music over George.

As he cruised down the motorway, contemplating this life-changing decision, he noticed some kids mucking about on an overpass. Suddenly, an object was thrown into the path of his car. There was too little time to evade it. He braced for impact, expecting it to crash through his windscreen. Instantly, he pictured himself being hit in the head. Losing consciousness. The car swerving and rolling. His dead, bleeding body hanging upside down. George, weeping at his funeral. There was a loud thud. Then a bang. He opened his eyes. The windscreen was okay. He checked his mirrors. A long plank of wood, with nails sticking out, was lying on the road behind him. He pulled over to check for damage. The front bumper was cracked. The tyres seemed okay. No other obvious damage. Damn feral kids. They could have killed him. Just for cheap kicks.

As he unloaded his gear for rehearsal, he noticed a severe tremor in his hands. His mouth was dry. Thoughts raced through his mind. Flashes of the object hurtling toward him from the overpass. The expectation of death. In rehearsal, he struggled to sing. He remembered jumping from the window ledge. Hurtling toward the ground. He forgot lyrics. His legs went weak. Even the melody was unreachable. The thud of the bass drum. The thud of his feet hitting the tarmac. His knees buckled. Couldn't focus. Another memory flashed into his awareness. When he was a kid. A plank with rusty nails sticking out. He wedged it under the tyre of a neighbour's car. Scurried away, giggling at the thought of the loud pop when

the guy tried to drive off. He'd no idea why he'd done it. Didn't even wait to watch. The rhythm of the hi-hats. The clickety-clack of the approaching train. Doug Havishan's mutilated body. For all his moral pomp, he wasn't so different from those feral vandals. The band stopped playing. The silence of coma. The silence of death. Ariran was hunched over on the floor. *At least I haven't brought any more into the world,* he sobbed to himself. *No more little vandals. No more captives of the flesh, desperate for sadistic thrills. None to suffer. None to cause others to suffer.*

Being in a band, and living with Martin, led Ariran to drink more than ever. Still, his intake could never match that of his friend. Plus, he never let himself go. He'd always manage to brush his teeth. Put the cap back on the toothpaste. Get himself to bed. By contrast, Martin's drinking continued to spiral out of control. He developed a notable tipping point. When the switch flipped, his eyes became unruly, and his mouth morphed into a rubbery mess. Instead of talking, he would make garbled burbling sounds. Sometimes, he tried to wrestle his mouth into making recognizable words using his hands. If any words did come out, it was usually a rant about how he could never drink enough. Often he'd cuss, slap a tabletop, and walk out of the room, slamming the door behind him. When he returned, he looked surprised to see anybody, as though he'd forgotten George and Ariran lived there. He reminded both of them of their drunken, abusive fathers.

Ariran didn't feel able to confront his friend about his alcoholism. He feared a backlash and reasoned that Martin was functional. Working his serviToil. Paying his bills. Besides, they'd qualified for a mortgage and had begun searching for a house to buy. They could move on soon. Leave Martin to live his life. So Ariran said nothing, until Martin overstepped the mark.

The night in question started like any Saturday. Drinks at the local pub followed by a takeaway. The trio watched a film back at the house and loaded up with more booze. Ariran went to bed not long after midnight, following George, who'd already gone up. Normally, he would have stayed up longer,

but Martin was already misbehaving. Drunken ramblings. Table slapping. Aimless wandering. Agitated. Paranoid. He seemed possessed.

Ariran nestled into George. Wrapped his arm around her. Closed his eyes. As he drifted into unconsciousness, there was a loud thud. Martin. He'd burst into the room, slamming the door open hard, knocking the lamp off George's bedside table. It was dark in the room. Dark outside on the landing. A little light spilled up from downstairs. Martin wandered to the end of the room. Then back near the door, next to George's side of the bed. He pulled his trousers down. Then his underpants. Grasping his cock in his hand, he moved close to the bed and stood over George. She woke. Cried for him to stop. Martin stumbled backwards into the wall, accidentally flicking the light switch on. Ariran froze. It was happening so quickly and seemed unreal. He wondered whether he was dreaming. Martin turned and staggered out of the room, pulling the door shut behind him with a loud thud.

George looked terrified. It was real alright. Ariran wasn't going to stand for it. No way. He jumped out of bed. Marched into Martin's room. Martin had flopped onto his bed, face down. Ariran flicked the light on and shouted, 'GET UP. GET UP, YOU BASTARD!'

Martin rolled over. 'Whahhhsthisss?'

'YOU KNOW WHAT! WHAT THE FUCK, MARTIN! YOU PUT YOUR COCK IN GEORGE'S FACE, YOU SICK BASTARD!' The more Ariran screamed, the more rage filled him.

Martin stood up. He put his hands out in protest. 'I doon't knaoeww wwhhaat you mean ... I ... I ...'

'YOU FUCKING LIAR.' Ariran began raining punches at Martin's skull. It was more difficult than he'd expected. They were standing too close. Martin was tall. The bedroom light was above his head, blinding Ariran as he tried to take aim. He moved to one side to get better sight and make some room, launching an uppercut into Martin's jaw with a crunch.

Suddenly, Martin became very alert. Almost sober. He backed off. Put his arms up for protection. 'Woah, woah, calm down', he pleaded. 'I don't know what I've done, but I'm sorry.

I'm truly sorry.'

Ariran stopped hitting him. Martin seemed genuinely confused. The look in his eyes had changed. He appeared more like the normal Martin. The one that was there before the agitated, paranoid, penis monster emerged. Ariran was still enraged. His knuckles throbbed. Continuing to punch seemed unwise. He looked around for a weapon. There was little to hand in the room. He planned his next move. A knee to the balls. A choke hold. But he held back. Shaking. Glaring. 'You don't know what you've done? Are you fucking with me?'

'No, no, honestly.'

'You burst into our bedroom and waved your cock in my girlfriend's face, you fucking prick. We'll be moving out very soon. You need to steer clear of that room until then, or I won't be responsible for what I'll do. I should fucking finish you right now.'

'No. Calm down. Wait until morning. I don't know, really I don't, and I'm sorry, we'll work this out. I'll cut down on the booze. It won't happen again.'

Ariran went back to bed and barricaded the door with a chair and some dumbbells. Then he got a jar of coins and placed it inside two socks. A cosh, just in case. He lay awake all night. An avalanche of thoughts tumbled through his mind. The burglary. The ghostly apparition of the sailor. The walking man stomping on his head. Jessy's lips. George. The wood dropped from the bridge. Clara's death. Kuu with a knife. Mother losing her temper for no reason. Hitting him. Tenebray hitting him. Grandfather One mocking him. Angry customers on the phone. Miranda's suicide. Hitting the ground after jumping. Jessy's legs. Brian being tortured with hot matches. Pain in his ankles. Clara's fingers. Mattias being cut to shreds. Pissing blood. The little metal umbrella. George pushing him over the couch. Martin's cock. Cutting with the razor. Clara's kisses. The hotel overdose. Being imprisoned in the psych hospiTech. Sharing a bunk bed with Mother. George's clutter. He had no space or peace. Nowhere. He couldn't even escape into the unconscious bliss of sleep. He was suffocating. Now his good friend had invaded his space in

the worst way possible. Such a dreadful world.

More thoughts came. Each one like a drip from a broken tap. Early childhood. The horse. The coma. Humiliating serviToil interviews. The relentless itch of eczema. The choking of asthma. Doug Havishan. Dropping out of uniTech. Janet's friendly face. Why hadn't he kept in touch? She was probably having a great life. Thoughts went around in his head for hours. Some merged into others in dreamlike fashion. His life was a nauseating nightmare. He wanted to wake up. For everything to be okay. Maybe it would never happen. Even death might bring no rest. His stomach turned. His head ached. Memories continued to twist like a demonic carousel, denying him the peace of sleep.

At ten in the morning, his torturous torrent of thoughts was halted. Martin got up noisily and took a shower. The white noise from the bathroom brought Ariran's awareness into the present. He wondered what to do. They needed to leave. He was resolute about that. But they'd nowhere to go. Staying in a hotel was too expensive. They could sleep in the car. Maybe take a tent out to the park. That would be worse than staying. Once Martin was dressed and downstairs, Ariran plucked up the courage to go and see what state he was in. To his disappointment, he found his rain of punches had only caused mild bruising and slight swelling around the eye. Not even a full shiner. He needed to work on his boxing skills.

They had an awkward chat. Martin drank tea instead of beer. Ariran decided to make peace. After all, wasn't the true test of a friendship to be able to forgive the unforgivable? Despite his fawning apologies, Martin was mostly worried about his parents finding out what he'd done. Ariran promised he'd keep it secret, provided Martin cut back on his drinking.

George and Ariran stepped up their efforts to find a house. Property prices were rising by the week. If the pattern continued, it would only be a matter of months before they were priced out of the market completely. Already, despite casting a wide net, they'd only found one property that looked okay and was affordable.

Before the viewing, they drove around the neighbourhood.

There were plenty of positives. A nearby park. Houses with hanging baskets. A wide road with ample parking. A handy row of shops around the corner. They blocked out the bad things. Broken bottles. Graffiti. Thugs in black tracksuits. Dangerous-looking, wide-jawed dogs. Black stains on the road from the molten debris of a burnt-out car.

The owner greeted them on the garden path. Ariran commented on the porch. Great for a potted plant. Neither of them noticed the bottle of urine stuffed in the front hedge. Nor the barbed wire strewn across the garden fence. Inside, the house had everything they needed. A decent sized kitchen. French doors that opened into a small garden. A large living room. Two double bedrooms. Central heating that worked.

When they returned to Martin's house, they talked with excitement, carefully constructing the fantasy of a happy home. Ariran would get peace. Nobody would stomp on the ceiling or burst into the bedroom in the middle of the night. They could have barbecues in the garden. Despite it being the first house they'd seen, George and Ariran put an offer in the next day. Five weeks later, they were loading up the car with their belongings and waving Martin goodbye.

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27. Longpig

The first few weeks in the new house were frantic. Ariran embarked on an ambitious program of renovation and decoration. He was driven by overexposure to house makeover programs. They tapped into the dark part of his subconscious. The need to escape the shame of his childhood home. The silent voice telling him he was unworthy. In truth, there was nothing dysfunctional about the house, save perhaps for a few of the old double-glazed windows. They'd failed and were misting up. A fault hidden by the vendor, who'd ensured the heating was on full blast for hours before the viewing, to evaporate the mist. George and Ariran assumed the extreme heat was because she was elderly, rather than wily.

Ariran attempted to do all the work himself, much of it within a fortnight. He grafted twelve hours per day without a break. Nothing went to plan. By the time he returned to serviToil, he was exhausted. There was still much to be done. He continued working every spare hour before and after serviToil. Then a bombshell landed on his desk. Notice of redundancy.

The decision to reduce staff numbers was made based on a brief report prepared by one of the board directors. A new chiefTech was installed. The man was immediately awarded a staggering ten-fold increase in salary with an equally generous benefits package. Yet, he was no exemplary strategist. Just another simpleton with a short-term slash and burn policy. He'd been born into the right family and had access to their privileged circles. Otherwise, he would have struggled to make middle management. At the time, the company was profitable. Ariran's division had achieved an unprecedented reputation for customer satisfaction, along with sizeable profits. They were growing year-on-year,

bucking the overall trend for many sectors of the market. Their success was down to an intelligent plan made by local management, based on long-term goals. But shareholders felt they weren't making enough fast money for doing nothing. Company-wide profitability was labelled 'stagnant'. Other words may have described the situation better. Viable. Successful. Stable. Consistent. Sensible. Moderate. Balanced. Conservative. Realistic. Sustainable. Reliable. But these words don't enthuse the greedy.

The first diktat to be imposed was a thirty percent reduction in operating costs. All sectors were equally affected. No exceptions. No granular evaluation of the consequences. Employees were operating costs. People who'd invested their time, learning, identity, emotion, and energy, working for the company. Things they would never get back. In return, all they wanted was reasonable pay, to be treated with respect, and to have a secure and stable future. They depended upon serviToil for their survival. None of the cuts were necessary. They were being made in service of avarice.

In face of a swamp of lies, Ariran's bubble burst. The life he'd bought into. The serviToil contract he'd signed. The broader social contract he'd acquiesced to. It was all a sham. Nothing more than precarious, state-sanctioned slavery. He remembered his younger self. Jumping from the window ledge to avoid becoming another farm animal. But he'd pushed that to the back of his mind. Fooled himself. Chosen a life in shackles. Now, in shame, he realized he hadn't made a pragmatic ontological choice. He'd sold his soul. And what for? To buy kitchen appliances and chipboard furniture. To have a place to eat, sleep, and wash. Things that were nothing more than self-maintenance to sustain his servitude to ignorant bullies. He'd duped himself into abiding by the common sense of the kutKish. Be useful to society. ServiToil hard. Abide by the law. Irrational obedience to a self-legitimizing mafia.

How could he escape? The *implicit* right to exist. The right all life lays claim to, simply by being. That right was wrapped in shame. Marketed as freeloading. Birth was merely a

gateway to servitude. He realized what 'human resources' really meant. And why the kutKish were referred to as 'human capital'. They'd been framed as objects. Consumables. Livestock. Nothing sacred about any of it. Foolishly, he'd let himself become beguiled by the malignant enchantment of television programs, advertising, and social conditioning. He'd been smarter as a child. The world looked complex. Society. Culture. Language. Fashion. Industry. Politics. You could get lost in the minutiae. Spend your entire life there. Now, the more he considered things from a distance, the simpler it appeared. The entire global social and economic system was ruled by two basic, biological commands. Consume and expand. Absurd, serpentine energies that metabolized material resources, energy, time, and people.

The snake of consumption took many forms. Eating. Building. Manufacturing. Farming. Buying. Easily comprehended physical processes. But less obvious was the consumption of abstract resources. Social relations. Psychic energy. Good will. Favours. Contracts. Bullying. Domination. Sex. Competition. Consumption was the masculine force. It went out and got the stuff. Impregnated it back into the system. Brought the pollen into the hive. Expansion was the feminine force. The serpent of metabolism. Growing internally. Becoming pregnant with demand. Pupating. Pushing outwards with a scream. Expanding demand for the masculine. More mining. More farming. More building. More people. More propaganda.

The meeting point of those combined forces. The beastly head of those intertwined snakes. That was greed. It cast anything aside in the blink of an eye if it saw an opportunity to feed. To absorb. To swell. To feed some more. The beast thought it was building a ladder to the heavens. But it was merely building its funeral pyre. Chasing its tail. Always looking forward, it ignored the destructive wake of its faeces. Toxicity. Anger. Fear. Despair. Eventually, it would collide with its limits. Then it would begin to eat its own waste, before trying to eat itself. The pyre would be lit. The old bird would die. The new bird reborn. And the whole sorry cycle

would begin again.

Ariran didn't want to be part of that cycle. He never had. But there was no alternative. Even the old ways of opting out. Becoming a mendicant. A monk. An ascetic. One of the pure ones. They were no longer possible. The planet had run out of space. And there were restrictions on almost everything. Laws prevented hunting in the wild. Outdoor cooking was banned. Harvesting wood, prohibited. Lighting fires, illegal. Bathing outdoors, restricted. Walking across the land unencumbered, impossible. Camping or constructing shelters was controlled, taxed, or forbidden. Carrying an axe to chop wood, or a knife to prepare food, resulted in imprisonment. If you bought your own land, you could do some of those things. But to accomplish that, you had to serve the system to get the money. And you still had to pay tax. It wasn't opting out at all. Wild animals had more freedom.

Sat at his desk, head in hands, Ariran wondered how he would tell George about his pending redundancy. One salary wouldn't cover the bills. They might lose their home. It seemed unfair. The old lady they'd bought the place from paid twenty-five times less for it than they did. Ten times less in real terms. Such price rises weren't solely about demand. They resulted from deliberately crafted policies designed to enable profiteering from a basic need. These malignant, private interests dictated every area of life. Ariran knew that if he refused to serve them, he would have no place to go. He bought a crate of cider on the way home. His only escape.

George saw he was upset as soon as he stepped through the door. He laid his notice of redundancy on the table and opened a can of cider. She read the letter and sighed. 'I can't see them letting you go, you're one of the best they've got.'

'Yeah, maybe.'

'You are. You're always on time, and you haven't had a day sick in years.'

'Yeah I did. I had that flu two years ago, remember?'

'Two years ago. And you get on with everyone. You serviToil hard.'

'I guess so.' Ariran knew she was right, but his angst ran

much deeper. Such pragmatic concerns devalued other dimensions. The existential. The ontological. The metaphysical. He wanted to explain his terrible vision of the world as a slave system. How economics was weaponized to change the soul. Why there was nothing more sacred than money. How they had effaced transcendent meaning and deified survival. But he couldn't find the words. He looked into George's kind eyes, wishing she would touch him with a loving caress. The way Clara did all those years ago. The way he imagined Jessy would, had things worked out differently.

After dinner, they settled in front of the TV. Ariran continued drinking. He could see now that they were watching actual programs for programming the kutKish. Television. The idiot box. A key tool of the eleLazi. No matter how innocuous or trivial these moving images seemed, all were imbued with an ideology. Competition. Superficial appearance. Material consumption. Riches were lionized. Morality mocked. Objections overlooked. Authority was manufactured through celebrity, or rampant acts of violence. Simultaneously, the glaring lie of meritocracy was sustained. He couldn't watch any longer.

Three months later, the company made its final decisions. Ariran's manager began calling people in to his office. The first few left in tears. Long-standing staff. Some with twenty or more years of service. None of them wanted to leave, but all had been laid off. Then came Ariran's turn. The manager shut the door. Sat down behind his desk. Let out a long sigh. Straightened his tie. Placed his palms flat on the desk in front of him. After a brief silence, he leant back into his leather chair. 'We were more than a little surprised to receive this, Ariran.' He motioned with his head toward Ariran's preference form on the desk. 'Could you tell us more?'

'As it says, it's clear the culture here is changing. I believe for the worse. I don't want to be a part of it. It would also spare the serviToil of someone who wanted to stay.'

The manager leant forward. Clasped his hands together. Cracked his knuckles. Grinned. 'You can leave anytime you

wish, Ariran.'

'Yeah, I guess so, but I was happy, or, well, okayish here until this ... this ...'

'Well, adjusting to progress isn't something everyone is capable of. It takes mettle to rise to the challenge. To embrace change. A certain type of person.'

'A mindless robot.'

'What? Sorry?'

'Nothing. I just don't understand why they're making changes. Customers are happy. Staff are content. We're profitable.'

'Yes but barely. These are challenging times. The ship may be afloat, but it must change course if it's to avoid the rocks.'

'What guff.'

'Now now. I know it's hard to hear, but let's keep this civil. The global market. Everything is changing. Things are getting tough.'

'Everything is changing because everything is being changed ... and tough for whom? The new chiefTech seems to have a rather generous deal compared to his predecessor.'

'Well, that's your opinion, Ariran. But really, there's no time for this. Let's get back to business. As I said, some people don't have the capacity to meet new challenges and alter course but, well, it's good news, we think you have what it takes. We've decided to keep you on.' He broke into a large smile.

'Good news? But I wanted to take redundancy?'

'Yes I know. It isn't your decision. You see, you have an excellent attendance and punctuality record. You serviToil hard. Your reports are good. The management think highly of your scores. We think you're good for the company. An asset we don't want to lose. Frankly, there's some dead wood here we can chop back, but we want you to be part of the new growth.'

'But you're sacking Sophie. She's been here three times as long as me. She's a good worker, not dead wood, and she doesn't want to go. How can—'

'Well, you see. No. I can't go into detail. Let's just say that,

sometimes, staff ease off the gas when they've been in serviToil a long time. They're unlikely to fit in with the new culture.'

'Is it because she's a union rep?'

The manager blushed. 'No, of course not.'

'But it makes no sense. I want to go. She wants to stay. You're doing the opposite.'

'Yes, but our primary consideration must be the needs of the business.'

'Needs? People have needs, businesses don't. Shouldn't the business be serving the needs of people, of society, rather than the other way around? Wasn't that the point of business in the first place? What you really mean by the needs of the business is the personal desires of greedy directors and shareholders, and to hell with everyone else.'

The manager leapt to his feet. Pushed his chair under his desk. Leant forward. Red-faced. Spitting words through gritted teeth. 'This conversation is over. I can see it's difficult for you. Our decision won't change. We want you on board. I hope you'll embrace the change. Help us with our future challenges. You're still free to work your notice and leave anytime without a redundancy payment if you really want to go. Nobody is forcing you to stay. Now, I suggest you take your ten-minute break. Go and calm down. And call Gary on your way out. Tell him to hurry. I'm running a little behind time.' He walked over to the door. Opened it wide. Went back to his desk. Sat down. Began impatiently clicking a pen.

Ariran was speechless. His veins burned with rage. For a moment, he feared the anger would become uncontrollable. He imagined picking up a chair. Smashing it over the manager's head. But he found himself walking out through the open door and across the office toward the break room. There was a chorus of quiet whispers as he passed his fellow workers.

Deciding that he wasn't calm enough to speak to anybody, Ariran bypassed the break room and headed to the toilet. He found a cubicle that was relatively clean and locked himself inside. Sitting on the closed toilet lid, he laid his head in his

hands and wept quietly. Sure, he was free to leave. Just like a person walked to the edge of a cliff with a gun to their head is free to jump off. What nonsense. He was an asset. A score. A coagulation of statistics. A utility, not a being. His feelings counted for nothing. The preference forms had been pretence. Just as the economy was a charade. The eleLazi called it progress, but it was acceleration. A mass in free-fall, subject to a simple force. Physics had gravity. Economics had greed. Without anything to oppose it, to create an obstacle for stability, greed became a singularity. A black hole. The continuous collapse of all things into themselves.

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28. Castle

The corporate restructure was worse than imagined. Ariran had been stationed in a quaint old building with interesting architecture. It was sold off. Retained staff were moved to another office. A brutal concrete block. Hot-desking was introduced. Once he'd battled through the dog-fight of the daily commute, he had to compete for a depersonalized workspace. It seemed like a deliberate attempt to cause as much stress and confusion as possible, all before the working day had even commenced. ServiToil was infantilized. They called it streamlining. Complex contextual considerations reduced to tick-box exercises. Fine craft, degraded to conveyor-belt processing.

Around the same time, industry representatives embarked on a publicity campaign linking rising insurance premiums with rising fraud. Yet, the industry was disposing of experienced staff. They wanted cheap, speedy turnover of claims. In-depth investigation was discouraged. Expensive legal contests discarded. Short-term economic consideration usurped morality. Deterrence was abandoned. Fertile ground for growing fraud.

For Ariran, the focus on quantity over quality created a taxing, unmanageable workflow. Less interesting. More stressful. Pay was linked to highly subjective performance-based reports, replacing objective competence-based measures. Developing new skills was no longer enough, now you had to be better than everyone else too. It was like throwing a bone to a pack of hungry dogs. Employee benefits were trashed. The staff car park and canteen were sold. Parking fees doubled overnight. Meals trebled in price. All permanent catering staff were fired and rehired. Precarious contracts. Minimum pay. No pension. It was the same across most industries, eviscerating the option of moving elsewhere

for better terms. Companies moved in lockstep. The game was rigged.

With insufficient staff, serviToil became impossible. Ariran returned home frazzled every day. Sleeping became difficult. The odd time he drifted off, he'd be woken by a recurring nightmare. A beeping sound in his ear. A caller screaming at him. Crowds of angry people marching toward his desk. A tornado of paperwork swirling around his head. He began sweating profusely and developed a tremor in his hands. It was challenging before the changes but had been sufferable. Now it was chaos.

Developments in the neighbourhood made things even worse. A gang had taken over a nearby block of high-rise flats. Large groups of hooded youths roamed the streets. George and Ariran's front garden was used as a toilet. The hedge, a dump for empty cans and bottles. Cars were vandalized. Graffiti popped up everywhere. Ugly scribblings, not art. A neighbouring house was set alight. Petrol through the letterbox. Another neighbour's door was kicked in while he sat watching television. His protests earned him a hammer blow to the skull. The poliTech raided a house round the corner. Thirty illegal immigrants were being held there. Cheap labour for an upmarket restaurant in the city centre. The type of suave place his manager frequented.

One morning, after having no sleep, Ariran took his regular shower and dressed. As he went to open the front door, his hand began to shake violently. It spread. Soon his whole body was trembling. He realized how numb he'd been. Like he wasn't in his body, just watching through a camera installed in his head. Now it had suddenly come to life. From his bones to his skin. From head to toe. Every nerve was screaming. Exhausted. Tense. Wracked with pain. And heavy, so very heavy. He couldn't face another day. Dizziness took hold. He tried to balance against the back of the front door, but his legs lacked the strength to keep him up. He fell to his knees and collapsed in a heap.

Suicidal thoughts flooded his mind. There was a length of blue nylon rope in the shed. The sort you could tow a car with.

But he was unsure how to make a noose. Maybe a bath with the electric heater. But the house was fitted with circuit breakers. Another overdose seemed like a bad idea. The thought made him nauseous. He'd just vomit. A pang of guilt. What about George? She'd be better off without him. In the long run. But the shock would be too much. He couldn't do it to her. Unless he could make it look accidental. That would take some planning. He called the office. A bad cold. Couldn't go in. First time he'd lied to get a sick day. Dragged himself to bed. Fell asleep.

When she arrived home, George was disturbed to find Ariran wrapped in the duvet, still wearing his serviToil clothes. 'Are you okay? Why aren't you at serviToil?'

'I've called in sick.'

'Sick, what's wrong with you?'

'I couldn't face it. I'm too tired, George, so tired ...'

'Well, I'm tired too! What do you mean tired?'

'Look, just leave me alone!' he snapped. 'I'm tired okay? Exhausted. I just want to ... I need to rest.'

'Don't take it out on me! You need to go to the mediTech.'

'No. What can the mediTech do?'

'Give you medicine. You need to get sorted.'

Ariran sat up, hugging a pillow. 'No, George. The mediTech can't fix my life. It's this neighbourhood. It's serviToil. The bastards have ground me down. I can't take any more. I've nothing left to give. They've milked me dry.'

'Can't you speak to your company?'

'And say what?'

'That you're depressed.'

'Great ... and what then?'

'See what they say.'

'See what they say? About what? They caused all this. They've pushed me over the edge. Do you think they care? It would only serve as a reason for them to get shut of me on the cheap.'

'Well, look, have a rest for a couple of days, see how you go.'

'Okay ... I'm sorry.'

Three days later, Ariran was no better. He hadn't washed or dressed. Just lay in bed, drifting in and out of sleep. Occasionally, he got up and shuffled round. Watched a bit of TV. George didn't know what to do. Her unease and anxiety only made things worse. She turned to home cooking. Cut fingers. Burnt arms. Made a lot of mess. Didn't clean up properly. She developed insomnia and birthed great black rings around her eyes. Wracked with guilt, Ariran promised to see the mediTech.

Cost-cutting meant the earliest appointment was in ten days. Unless it was an emergency. In which case he should go to the hospiTech. Ariran called the office. Explained he was having some personal issues. Asked to take ten days holiday. They refused. He felt compelled to divulge more. Told them he was severely fatigued but couldn't get an appointment. They told him ten days without a mediTech's certificate was unacceptable. Extra stress. What was he supposed to do? He hung up. Went into the kitchen. Grabbed a carving knife. Pressed it into his wrist. Lifted it away. Put it down. Tried calling the mediTech. Pleaded with the receptionist. No appointments. He cracked. Began to cry. Told the receptionist he was trapped without help. He'd become suicidal. He couldn't cope. She put him on hold for ten minutes, then came back. The mediTech would write a sick note for the ten days. She mumbled 'blagger' and laughed as she hung up.

On the day of his appointment, Ariran waited two hours. The mediTech was running late. He entered the consulting room so tired he could barely speak. A young, female mediTech invited him to sit. She had a pleasantly melodic accent. Soft, slow, and compassionate.

'Hello. I'm Med. Cortez. What can I help you with today?'

'Well, I've lost ... er ... I'm exhausted, no energy at all ... it's serviToil you see ... I can't cope ... I'm ... tired.'

'Ah. No problem. Here, I'll give you a sick note so you can recuperate. Will four weeks be enough?' She reached for a pad on her desk.

'Er ... okay ... well, but ... I mean ... do you have pills? I'm so tired. I can't think ... I can't sleep ... I don't—'

'It's best to avoid pills. They have side effects. Then you need pills for the side effects. They have side effects. Then you need pills for the side effects of the pills you're taking for the side effects of the other pills. Then you get cancer. Or heart disease. Or liver failure. Take some time off. It's the best medicine.' She smiled and handed Ariran the note. 'If you're still struggling before this runs out, come back and see me. We can talk more about pills.'

He left clutching the sick note. A three-minute conversation. Four weeks off. She was probably right. He really needed rest. But he felt uneasy. What if it didn't help?

George was waiting in the lounge. He told her what had happened.

'That's it?' she asked.

He shrugged, 'Four weeks off. Go back if I'm no better.'

'Are they sending you for anything else?'

'What like?'

'You know, blood tests to make sure you aren't actually sick, or psychTalk, or something?'

'No.'

Taking time off lifted a little anxiety. Temporarily. The company had gutted employee perks, but they hadn't got rid of sick pay. Except for new employees. Without that cushion, he couldn't have taken time off. He would have been driven to suicide.

Despite the respite, worries began to mount up. There were bills to pay. And what about George? Whenever he imagined returning to serviToil, he felt pain in his guts. Uncomfortable electric impulses shooting through his limbs. It made him worse. Similar serviToil would carry the same damaging pressures. He'd no energy or money to try to do something different. The anxiety should have been a healthy signal. There was a threat he needed to rectify. Things he needed to plan for. But he was powerless to do anything, so his anxiety became illness.

A week passed. A little more energy. He'd try to learn video editing. Preparing videos of the band had taught him the basics. He'd enjoyed it, apart from the discomfort, headaches,

and neck pain from sitting in front of a screen. The new focus distracted him from his worries. He became addicted. By his third week off, he was spending most of the day in front of the computer.

George was worried. 'You're supposed to be resting.'

'I can't rest, George. What am I going to do? Go back there? Nothing will have changed. I'll only break down again. Nobody will be picking up my tasks, there aren't enough staff. It'll be even worse. They'll hate me for being off. I'll get called a skiver. Maybe I can do something with this. Find another way to earn money. ServiToil from home under my terms.'

'Starting a business isn't easy, Ariran. We've got no money. You've had a breakdown. How are you going to cope?'

'I don't know. It can't be worse than being in that place. I mean, I'm taking abuse all day long. I've even had two people make death threats. I'm not being paid for that! You know, they took on a war veteran. Combat experience. Honourable discharge. He quit after a week. Couldn't cope with the stress.'

'But how will you make money?'

'How do you think?'

'I need to know we can pay the bills, Ariran, that's all.'

'Fuck the bills. I can't live life the way it is. It has to change, or I'm going to end up dead. Can't you understand that?'

'Don't you think you'll end up dead if you can't pay the bills? Where will we live? What will we eat?'

'Oh, come on, George, give me some support. I'm telling you, I can't go back there. I'll kill myself. Bills are the modern-day chains of slavery. That's how they keep us in our place. We've nowhere else to go. We can't go and live in the wild. Live off the land like it used to be before those poor bastards were rounded up like animals and cast into the open prisons of cities centuries ago. Can't you see? It's prison. The only reason they don't need violence now is because they've removed our capacity to say no. Not just by enclosing and privatizing everything, but by brainwashing. Manipulating minds. People don't even realize.'

'I don't want to live in a field, I want to live in a house!

Anyway, there are too many people to live out in fields. Things can't be the way they used to be. It wasn't that pleasant you know.'

'You're right. They've herded us up. Locked the gate. Encouraged us to breed ourselves into a right predicament. We're being farmed.'

'Farmed?'

'Yes. Don't you see it? No, no, of course you don't. How could a sheep understand the concept of farming?'

'Are you calling me—'

'Sorry. Look. Yes. I guess. I'm trying to explain. Can a sheep understand what a farmer is?'

'Well, they seem to recognize farmers and respond to them.'

'Yeah, sure, they follow buckets of feed. Understand they're generally wanted to do certain things following learnt signals. But they don't, and can't, understand what a farmer is. Right?'

'I don't know what you're getting at.'

'A sheep. Can a sheep understand the concept of farming? Does it understand that the purpose of its existence is to serve the material needs of the farmer and his species? That it's not really a being. It's a self-reproducing unit of wool and meat on legs. And if it did truly understand its predicament, what would it do? What could it do?'

'I don't know. It's best they don't know, I guess. They seem happy enough.'

'Do they? And even if they are, it's only born of ignorance. Besides, sheep have it comparatively easy. It's not like they have to serviToil in a fucking call centre all day. All they do is amble around eating, bleating, and breeding. The meat and wool just happen. It's all very pleasant and calm in comparison with human farming. I wish they'd hurry up. Take me to the slaughterhouse.'

'I don't know what you're blathering about. You need to see the mediTech if you're thinking like that.'

'You just don't get it, do you? I've seen the mediTech. Why is it my fault? The workplace is awful. The neighbourhood is dreadful. It's making me sick. I've tried, I really have. I'm not

choosing for it to be this way.'

'Well, not everyone who works there is sick, are they? And I live here. I'm still going to serviToil.'

'No ... I mean, who knows. Not everyone's the same. It's not like we're all identical clones, even if they treat us like we are. Maybe, in time, others will get sick. Maybe you will. There are plenty of sad and depressed people around. Others are storing up heart attacks, strokes, and cancer. The ones that seem happy with all this, they must be stupid or evil. That's what they're doing. They're creating a system that selects for dolts and sociopaths. Eliminating those of us with heart-felt intelligence. It's an overthrow of the living by the living-dead. We're prisoners from an ancient war. Forced to serviToil in the crushing oppression of grey concrete prisons and networked electronics. Dammit! Why should I have to live such a life? It's not even living. I want to live. *This* isn't it. If I can't live, I want to die.'

'Who exactly are *they* that you keep talking about?'

'Them, the eleLazi, the—'

'Oh hell, not that. Not you.'

'What do you mean not me? Just because I've the vision to see? They want me to kill my real self. Make me live like a zombie slave. I can't do it.'

'There you go again. Can't you be practical?'

'What, like you? Practically dead?'

'That's not fair.'

'I'm sorry, you're not helping.'

'Okay, whatever, I'll leave you to it ... but something has to work. I can't go on like this? Don't you think I get tired?'

'You need to get out of the system too.'

'You just said there's no way out. And I've no intention of killing myself.'

Ariran returned to serviToil the following week. Despite his argument with George, he felt mentally refreshed. He was hopeful. For a day. Then the fatigue, anxiety, and depression returned. Some of his tasks had been picked up by colleagues, but he could taste their resentment. They barely spoke to him. What little they had done was shoddy. Some had messed

things up, leaving more work than if they'd left well alone. It felt like he was being punished for being ill. But it was several weeks until he snapped again. This time, he saw a different mediTech.

'What happened to Ms Cortez?' asked Ariran.

'Ah. The cateLien lady.' The mediTech smiled and shrugged. 'She moved on, I guess. I'm her replacement. Now, what can I help you with?'

'Well, I came not so long ago for help with feeling tired. Drained. Depressed. Unable to cope with serviToil. I had a couple of weeks off and went back. But I feel just as bad. I don't see any solution, so I want to kill myself.'

'Oh? Have you tried antidepressants?'

'When I was younger. But this is different. I mean, I want to live. I just don't see how I can. The world. It's awful. It isn't my mind, you see. I could happily live in another world. One that doesn't exist.'

'That doesn't sound too realistic. Why don't we give the pills a go? They'll get the happy molecules working in your brain. Maybe you'll think the world is less awful then?'

'Happy molecules? But aren't you drugging me to make me like something that, frankly, is wholly detestable? It's quite natural that anyone with a heart and a brain would want to avoid it. I mean, there's nothing natural or good about being cooped up like a battery hen all day. Being shouted at. Asked to do the impossible. Paid badly. Spoken to like a child and—'

'Look, I'm a mediTech not a magician. Sure, there are problems in the world, but most people don't feel the need to end their lives. Take another four weeks off. Take the pills. They should be working by then. If not, come back and see me.'

Four weeks passed quickly. On his return to serviToil, Ariran was called into a meeting. The company was concerned about his absences. His need for medication. They suggested, rather forcefully, that he should consider part-time hours. He went to see his union rep. She explained that the company was protecting itself. Probably trying to minimize liability. Just in case he had a permanent breakdown or killed himself.

Since they'd implemented the recent changes, five staff members had become mentally ill. One ended their life by hanging. If they made too many people sick. If the changes were deemed irresponsible. The company might get sued. Unlikely, but they were mitigating risk nonetheless. It was best he accepted the offer. Avoid any further absence. Ariran broke the news to George when he arrived home.

'Part-time? But ... how will we pay the bills?'

'Is that the rattling of chains I hear? Look, George, I'm sure there'll be enough. We'll just have to be extra careful. No holidays, nights out, takeaways, that sort of thing.'

'No holidays?! Great for you! You're on a permanent holiday now. Part-timer.'

'It's just for now, George. See how things work out. I'm not on holiday at all. It'll give me a bit more breathing space. I can work more on video production. It'll be an investment.'

George raised her eyebrows. 'An investment! Ha! Whatever. Okay. You try to get yourself right.'

Ariran serviToiled part-time for a year. Busy as hell but just about manageable. Despite extra sleep, he still felt drained and exhausted. Every morning was a struggle. After serviToil, he would often go straight to bed and stay there until the following morning. At weekends, he continued to learn new skills. George and Ariran grew further apart. She'd always had a low libido. He could no longer make up for it. Antidepressants depressed his sex drive. Left him emotionally numb. He needed pain to turn him on. Whipping. Spanking. Ropes. Clamps. George wasn't into that scene. It frightened her. Her boundaries were tight. Dispassionate. Suffocating. She settled into the safety of joyless asexuality. A cage of boredom and ritual anxiety. Both felt bound by mutual obligation. Resentment germinated, its first shoots sprouting as friction about their finances. The relationship was in jeopardy. Ariran felt compelled to save it. He always wanted to save things. To hold them. To fix them. To make them right. George had supported him through a rough time, albeit reluctantly. Now, he wanted to show how much he valued her.

To show his belief that, one day, things would be much brighter.

A beautiful sunny day. Late spring. In the distance, a steep mound of grass and rock. Topped with a castle. Flanked by the sea. It looked magical. George and Ariran strolled toward it.

'What is with you today?' asked George.

'What?' asked Ariran innocently.

'You're being ... you're being all weird, are you okay?'

'Me? Weird. How dare you', Ariran laughed. 'No, everything is fine. Nice here, isn't it?'

'Oh yes, beautiful.'

'Not as beautiful as you.'

'See, you are being weird.'

They entered the castle. Walked up narrow stone steps inside a turret. Ariran's hands began to tremble. Terrified of rejection. She could still say no, even after so long together. The castle interior was old and stuffy, but the view from the top was glorious. He pretended to watch the seagulls, waiting for an opportune moment. There were dozens of people. He hadn't planned for that. In his imagination, there had only been the two of them. George leant on a parapet. Watched the sea. She got bored after ten minutes. A little agitated. The ice cream shop was due to close imminently, and it was a twenty-minute walk down the hill to reach it.

To hell with it! Ariran thought. It was near perfect. The castle. The sunshine. The view. He got down on one knee. Took the ring out of his pocket. Opened the box. Held it up. 'George, I love you very much and would be greatly honoured if you would agree to become my wife. Will you marry me?'

Noticing the drama, a small crowd gathered. Ariran felt the cold stone under his knee. The joint began to ache, causing a tremor in his leg. George looked frozen with fear. She failed to answer. His face flushed with embarrassment. He raised his eyebrows to try to draw a response.

'FUCK OFF!' George exclaimed with a wry smile.

'What?'

'I mean, I can't believe it.' She took the box out of his hand and stared at the ring.

'Er ... George, does that mean yes or no?'

'Well, of course, you dummy.'

'Of course what?'

'Of course ... er ... yes.'

'Yes, you will marry me?'

'I guess so.'

Ariran got up. Gave George a quick kiss. She was limp and unresponsive. A voice chirped up from behind, 'Hello, excuse me, did you just propose?' A young man. Grinning. Recently engaged. He turned to George. 'You must be so happy, it's such a romantic place.'

'Er ... yeah. I feel a bit weird actually', said George, gazing out to sea.

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29. Church

Ariran anticipated a long engagement. He wanted to save up before paying for a wedding. They had enough debt already. George was keen to get on and make plans. It wasn't that she was impatiently enthusiastic about marrying Ariran. She was worried about her grandfather, Cedric. He was old and frail. George wanted him to walk her down the aisle, in absence of her father. She worried he might die if they waited. They took out another loan.

Making wedding plans gave them something to work on together. An invaluable distraction from the daily grind. Ariran suggested a pagan wedding. George wanted a church wedding. Wanting her to be happy, he acquiesced. They set a date for October. By August, they'd nailed the arrangements. The church. The function room. The hotel. The catering. All booked and paid for. Invites sent. Responses received. Then, in September, an ominous letter arrived. Ariran's employer. Notice of redundancy.

George flopped onto the couch, biting her bottom lip, and gazed blankly out of the window. Ariran brewed two mugs of tea and brought them into the lounge.

'I can't believe it. Bastards. What will you do?' she asked, cupping her hands around her mug.

'I'll put in for redundancy again. Maybe try to make my wishes even clearer this time.'

'And then what?'

'Well, with being part-time, my redundancy payment will be smaller than it would have been, but it'll still cover the bills for a few weeks. I'll try to start a business.'

'A few weeks? All those years and all you get is a few weeks to completely turn your life around?'

'Yeah, being a farm animal is a shitty business, but it's something. There'll come a day when people will get nothing

at all. Instead of campaigning for improvements, they'll hate on people like me who think we all deserve better. No need for the dogs. The sheep will herd *themselves* into the slaughterhouse.'

'There you go again. Enough about the sheep! What's all this about business? Doing what?'

'Videos. Remember? We talked about it before. I'm getting good. I could dip my toe in and see. Maybe do some graphic work too.'

George looked down to the floor. 'The wedding?'

'No change there. We're all set. You'll have your big day, don't you worry.' He gave her a reassuring hug. In truth, he wasn't so confident about the future, but George seemed genuinely excited about their marriage. Perfunctory sex returned most Saturday mornings, and she'd become comfortable with cock rings and handcuffs. It boosted his optimism. Helped him imagine a new life. It was the serviToil culture that was really breaking him. It didn't need to be that way. He'd be better off out. And if he made things work, they could try to find somewhere more pleasant to live.

It would be three months before they'd inform him of his fate, but Ariran felt confident he'd be made redundant this time. Knowing his suffering should have an imminent end made it more tolerable. Most people can endure almost anything for a limited time. It's when there's no end in sight. No promise of relief. No finish line. That's when they give up. In those circumstances, even the most minor of annoyance could send a person over the edge. He focused on the feeling of dropping the burden and walking away, ignoring the future beyond. Ariran's body had recovered well from terrible injury but not without consequences. He knew his mind was permanently damaged too. It had been through worse trauma than his body. There would be repercussions as his life continued to unfold. But it was more complex to understand than broken bones. He wasn't sure how to handle it. Managing physical activity, and treating stinging joints, was simple by comparison. Despite his uncertainty, one thing was beyond doubt. It was best he left that place before it was too

late.

The big day arrived. They struck lucky with the weather. Unusually warm and dry for the time of year. Ariran waited at the altar. George arrived on time. The organist began to play. The pews fell silent. Arm-in-arm with her grandfather Cedric, she made her way slowly up the aisle. Ariran glanced back nervously, expecting to be enchanted. George's hair was in a high bun. He'd never seen it like that before. It looked awful. He cast his eyes over her figure. The dress seemed very ill-fitting. Especially tight around the arms. She'd put weight on. He recalled two female colleagues who'd married. They'd spent months before their wedding exercising and eating low calorie diets. The photographs were stunning. George had let herself go. She'd put immense effort into looking her worst. Her face was frozen with fear. Maybe she was trying to scare him off. He felt guilty, but try as he might, he couldn't see her as beautiful. Neither of them smiled. George passed a painted wooden panel. An antique medieval artwork. *The Dance of Death.*

Noticing Ariran was lost in thought, the vicar tapped his elbow and whispered in his ear, 'Tell her she looks beautiful when she arrives, it'll help settle the nerves.'

'Okay.'

George's grandfather released her. She arrived by his side.

'You look ... beautiful', Ariran mumbled. George forced a stiff smile. They turned to face the vicar. She moved like a rusted robot. The ceremony began. Ariran's thoughts continued to drift. *Do I really know her? She's always been a little closed off. Guarded. Dispassionate. Is the wedding a charade? Is my whole life a charade? All that time we've lived together, what has it been worth? Was it merely a convenient arrangement? Sex isn't great. She doesn't kiss me like she loves me. She doesn't understand my world view. Now this. Standing there like a trampled meringue, like it's the last place on earth she wants to be.* He tried to push the thoughts out of his head, reasoning that it must be the church. Stale. Lifeless. The dead ritual. Nerves. He'd be okay once the ceremony was

over. Everything would make sense.

'I do,' surrendered Ariran. He'd gone through the entire ceremony on autopilot, aided by the vicar's prompts.

With permission to kiss the bride, he leant towards George's lips. They were painted dark burgundy. Ariran hated lipstick. But this was George's day. She'd chosen to wear lipstick. He was going to have to kiss it. Just as their lips were about to meet, she turned away slightly. Ariran pulled back, embarrassed. His heart sank. The hard stone walls echoed with a crescendo of fidgeting, followed by a crashing wave of whispers.

Once the photographs were done, it was time to depart for the wedding breakfast. They rode in the back of a fabulous vintage car. A short journey, made in silence. At the venue, they welcomed their guests one by one. Once everybody was in and settled, they paraded to the head table amidst a polite round of applause. The newly-weds barely spoke during the meal. Then came the speeches. Ariran almost broke down crying while delivering his. There it was. His heart. He did feel strongly about George. About all they'd been through together. She'd always been there by his side, cracking on with life, never causing much fuss. Yes, yes, he was in love. The doubts he'd had during the ceremony were gone now. A belly full of beer had relaxed him. Helped him see things clearly.

With the meal over and speeches concluded, it was time to party. Ariran removed his tie and loosened the top button of his shirt. So many good friends. All in one place. It was wonderful. Beer. Dancing. Wine. Laughter. Port. Haughty conversation about things soon forgotten. Whisky. Eleven o'clock arrived. Time for the couple to leave. They walked to the hotel to get some air. He wondered if she was wearing the underwear he'd gifted. A tasteful two-piece set. Pure white silk decorated with a little lace. He imagined arriving in the hotel room. She'd undress seductively. He'd embrace her. They'd fall onto the bed in throes of passion.

In the hotel room, Ariran popped to the bathroom to brush his teeth. While removing icing and chunks of dead animal from his rear molars, he pictured George reclined on the bed

in her underwear, smiling. Handcuffs dangling from a finger. Short riding crop in hand. An electric pulse rippled from his solar plexus to his groin.

When he emerged, he found her draped across the bed. Snoring. She'd fallen asleep in her wedding dress. Face smeared with makeup. Big black streaks under her eyes. Burgundy smudges that curved up from her lips. She looked so peaceful.

He made a coffee. Pulled a chair to the bedside. Watched her for a long time. The day's events played over in his mind. The ceremony felt awful, but it probably looked okay, apart from the missed kiss. The meal was good. Lots of laughter. Friends and family enjoying a break from their daily races. George had fulfilled her wish to walk up the aisle with Cedric. The old man looked so proud. But had she really wanted *him* to be there at the end of that walk? He began to sober up a little, becoming painfully aware of an empty feeling. Like he'd spent the day as a passenger in someone else's body.

The following Monday, they set off for a short honeymoon. Four nights in a romantic city. Cheap flights. Clean hotel. It was a beautiful place. George was especially fond of the ice cream. They spent their time strolling around tourist spots. Large stone constructions in various states of dilapidation. On the last day, they visited the micronation of the Representative of the greatGlow on Earth. The grandeur and opulence were impressive. Expensive marble. Gold. Incredible art. Weird idols, mostly modelled on perversions of pagan astronomy; a simulated iconography that formed part of the eleLazi system of control. An open secret most kutKish knew nothing of. As resplendent as it was, the grand architecture of the lie irked Ariran as much as it amused him. But something else troubled him much more. A feeling he had about the place. A cold energy. A spiritual darkness. It chilled him to the bone. Like something dead had got inside him.

'Come on, George, let's get out of here, grab a coffee.'

'But there's more—'

'No, let's go. Last chance for an ice cream, remember, we're off home early tomorrow.'

'Oh yeah! Are you okay, you look like you've seen a ghost?'

'Just got a chill, that's all.'

'In this weather!?'

'I'm probably tired. A coffee will warm me up.'

Brief honeymoon over, the couple arrived home. Ariran played the answerphone messages. There was one from Tenebray asking him to call back as soon as he could.

'I've got bad news, Ariran, Father was found dead while you were away.'

'Dead? How?'

'He died in his bedsit alone. Probably a heart attack. He'd been dead for a while.'

Ariran was shocked. He hadn't thought about Father much over the years. He certainly hadn't wanted him at the wedding. 'Dead for a while?'

'Yeah,' Tenebray's voice wobbled, 'the ... the guy in the flat below him, he called the poliTech when he noticed the flies ... and the stain on his ceiling ... fluids had started to seep through.'

'Oh no.'

'There's nothing to worry about. I know you've not been back long. I'll be organizing the funeral. Just one thing. Are you okay to help carry the coffin? It'll keep the costs down. All that old drunk left us was the funeral bill.'

'Er ... sure. My back isn't great, you know, after the breaks from my, er, fall. What does it involve?'

'Just carrying it from the hearse into the crematorium. One corner each. Nothing more. Black tie and all that.'

'Right ... okay. I should be okay with that.'

'Great. The funeral director objected to me being involved. Said it wasn't appropriate for a woman. I soon put him right.'

Ariran put the phone down and told George. She hadn't met Father. Unsure how to react, she draped a limp hand across his shoulder and tried to comfort him. Ariran felt numb. For much of his childhood, he'd wished Father dead. Often, he'd told people he was dead. It was less embarrassing than explaining that his parents were divorced, and Father an unemployed alcoholic. Anyway, it was sort of true. Father was

dead inside. He was dead to Ariran.

As the news sank in, he realized Father had been truly dead on his wedding day. When he'd sat watching his sleeping bride, wondering about the emptiness inside, Father's body lay on a worn, grotty carpet, in a tiny bedsit. All the days he was flouncing around on his honeymoon. Eating delicious desserts. Smoking. Drinking fine coffee. Soaring through the sky in a plane. Down there. In one of those insignificant matchbox buildings. Father had been decomposing. Juices from his bloated carcass dripping through the floorboards, like red sugar sauce dripping from an ice cream.

Ariran opened the fridge and grabbed a cold beer. He thanked himself for stocking up before they'd gone away. George made herself a cup of tea. The evening wore on. The numbness wore off. Ariran was in the kitchen opening his fourth can when he broke. 'Father!' he cried and began to sob.

George ran into the kitchen.

'Oh George! Just to have one more chance. To go for a beer with him. To ask him why. Now he's gone. I'll never know who he was. Never understand his pain and my loss.'

George held him limply in her arms. She tried to console him, patting him on the back like she was winding a baby. 'Hey, shhhh, there there, maybe there was nothing to find out. I mean, what do you think he might have said?'

'I don't know ... I'll never know. Can you stop doing that on my back? It feels weird.'

Ariran had sharp pains in his chest. A fist in his throat. Now he could truly mourn the loss of Father. Not the man's recent biological termination, but the living loss. A child without a father. A man without a friend. A loss that seemed unreal because he'd no experience of what was missing. Just a gnawing feeling of vague absence. Something that should have been there but wasn't.

30. Migraine

Tenebray tried to lift the coffin using one of the gold handles. It snapped. They were plastic. The funeral director forgot to explain they were only for show. The box had to be lifted by its chipboard base. Balanced on the shoulder. They tried again. The funeral director and hearse driver at the front. Ariran and Tenebray at the rear. It was very heavy. Ariran suspected he was carrying far more than his fair share of the weight. His spine twitched and tingled. His ankles ached and wobbled. For the whole slow walk, he feared he'd collapse. He imagined the coffin falling onto the hard floor. Splitting open. Revealing the festering corpse inside. It shouldn't have felt so heavy. Father was small. Gaunt. He'd spent most of his paltry income on cheap beer and whisky, often foregoing food altogether. Ariran wondered if it was the right body in the box. Maybe an extra limb had been thrown in. They could dispose of a victim every week that way.

The box slid onto the catafalque with ease. Ariran was relieved. He'd been carrying the end with Father's head in. It would have been only inches away. The image of a swollen, decayed face kept popping into mind. He wondered if the eyes were still intact. They probably sewed them up with a body that old, once they'd cleaned off the maggots.

The ceremony commenced with an insipid formal introduction. Tenebray rose to make a brief speech to the six people in attendance. She was raw and honest. Spoke openly about Father's love of alcohol. Didn't try to make out he was someone he wasn't. He'd been an awful parent. Chose booze over his family. Hated life so much, he could do nothing besides medicate himself into stupor as often as possible. Tenebray concluded by forgiving Father for his lack. For his absence. For his addiction. Some tacky classical music played through tinny speakers. Curtains slowly veiled the coffin.

Forgive? She'd meant it too. Forgiving had never crossed Ariran's mind. He'd done nothing to deserve such an irresponsible and uncaring father. An entire childhood filled with his absence. He couldn't forgive that. He'd carried his coffin. One last favour for which Father would never thank him. Wasn't that enough? Besides, the man was dead. He didn't exist any more. He would be forgiving a memory. For what? How could he benefit from accepting the unacceptable? It would be like turning his mind inside out. Bending reality into delusion, desperately hoping for inner peace. A living suicide. Fuck that.

Ariran wanted nothing more than to release his anger and resentment. To let them burn in the fire with Father's corpse. But they weren't just unpleasant emotions. They were teachers and guides. They helped him understand himself. His unmet needs. The needs of others. They helped him understand the world. The evil at its core. The importance of avoiding reproducing his parents' mistakes. They taught him what love was. Real love. For the first time, he realized in his heart something he'd always known in his mind. He'd never been shown real love. His parents never loved him. They were incapable because they'd never loved themselves. They'd never loved each other. Clara would have waited, had she truly loved him. George didn't love him either. She'd never been loved, she'd never loved herself. A new and terrible darkness fell over him. The relaxed optimism he'd discovered during his honeymoon, and his hope for the future, vanished. Immolated along with Father.

On returning to serviToil, the manager called him in for a meeting.

'Hi, Ariran, good to see you back. How was the wedding?'

'It went well. We had a nice time.'

'And your honeymoon? Where was it you went?'

'Just a city break. It was pleasant, thanks.'

'It must have been a shock when you found out about your father? I was sorry to hear about that.'

'Yes. It was unexpected.'

'Well, I just wanted to acknowledge that things might be

difficult for you right now, but the main reason I've called you in is to tell you the news about your future here.'

'Oh. Right. I'd almost forgotten.'

'You indicated a preference to be granted redundancy. I'm pleased to say the company has agreed this time. Here's some information with the full details and, for the sake of formalities, you are still entitled to appeal the decision if you want to.'

'Oh, thanks.'

'You must be pleased?'

'Er, yeah, I guess so.'

'What will you do next, do you have any plans?'

'I intend to start my own business.'

'Well, good luck with that and, Ariran, given the circumstances, the death and all that, it would be understandable if you didn't return to serve your notice. I'm speaking off the record, of course. I can't advise you not to come in. You can if you'd like. I'd be more than happy to have you here for the final few weeks. But if you didn't come in, well, what would we do? Sack you?' As he spoke those last words, he winked.

The wink. That covert tool of confusing communication. Ariran wondered when and why the social behaviour of winking evolved. Perhaps it began as a courtship display. It was a talent to wink with one eye, instead of blinking with both. Proof of physical skill and intelligence. Maybe from such an origin, its use broadened into a more general indication of trust and friendship. As time progressed, it morphed into a contextual shibboleth. Then again, the whole thing might have started accidentally. The result of a neurological disease or an eye infection. Its ambiguity reflected its meaningless lack of design. Just like everything else.

Noting the long silence, the manager wrapped things up. 'Go home Ariran. Have a think about it. I'll give you a call in a few days.'

Mentally, Ariran was in a bad place. He wasn't sure what he was going to do next. Probably something with videos, but

he'd no concrete plan. A few days later, when the manager called, Ariran confirmed he wouldn't return to the office. Thanked him for being understanding.

A week later, an order of printing equipment arrived.

'What's this?' asked George.

'Sublimation', declared Ariran.

'Sublimation ... what's that?'

'Sublimation. Instead of distraction, anchoring, or isolation. The art of taking shit and turning it into art. It's still shit, the art, having been made from shit, but isn't good shit better than bad shit?'

'What are you talking about now?'

'An ontology of despair.'

'In normal speak?'

'Okay. I use this special ink and paper to print designs. Then I press them into T-shirts, mousepads and the like, using the big square iron.'

'And then what?'

'Sell them of course.'

At first, sales were slow. Then he had a great idea. Flags. Everybody belonged to a country with a flag, and national flags weren't subject to copyright. A flag could be sold to almost anybody. They could be worn anytime. The kutKish loved vacuous symbols of identity. Most were proud of their nationality, as if they'd chosen it. Plus, there were always sporting events and national holidays to spark interest.

Because he was making to order, he could advertise products, with all sorts of rare flags, without the risk of wasting money on stock. He signed up to a popular online marketplace and soon had a store full of items. Orders started coming in. Feedback was positive. His reputation grew. Soon he was getting bulk orders for sports teams and family parties. Within three months, he earned enough to pay half of the household bills. Things were looking up. Nobody on his back. No endless queue of callers. No difficult, angry people. No timed visits to the toilet. No micromanagement of his emotions, like having to force a fake smile as he spoke. No commute. Just a short walk each morning to mail his

creations.

Feeling easier about the most pressing aspects of life, Ariran dealt with something that had been niggling him for a while. A toothache. It developed on the honeymoon. Too much sugary ice cream. He'd tried to ignore it, but it became too painful.

After checking in at reception, he took a seat in the waiting room. A small stack of dated magazines were piled in the corner. Interior decorating. Fashion. Countryside living. Ariran thumbed through a couple. They depicted a life far removed from the one he'd experienced. He looked around the room. Nobody there could afford the lifestyle portrayed in those glossy pages.

A young woman sitting nearby answered her mobile phone. She had a very loud voice. 'YEAH, I'VE GORRA WAIT ... WOH? ... NO ... 'E SED A NEED A FILLIN' ... WOH? NO, I'VE GO' THE BABBA ... E'S GIVEN US AN INJECSHUN ... I'VE GORRA WAIT ... NO ... I DUNNO HOW LONG ... I CARN EAR YA, I'LL BELL YA WHEN I'M OUT.'

Ariran was called by the toothTech. A tall, thin man with bulbous eyes and a dark tan. He looked strikingly angry. Moved in fast jerks like an insect. He pulled Ariran's mouth open. Poked around with a mirror and pointy metal tool. 'Yes, we need to replace this filling', he said, pressing hard on the bad tooth.

'OW!' cried Ariran.

'Sore, huh? How long have you had this filling?'

'Oh, since I was young.'

The toothTech tutted and turned his back. He spun back around holding a needle. 'Open', he commanded.

Ariran opened his mouth. The needle was jabbed into his gum.

'Whash the neegle for?' Ariran asked, trying not to knock the man's fingers with his teeth.

'You don't want to feel the pain, do you?'

'Whock paih?'

'When I replace that filling', the toothTech said, rolling his eyes mockingly. He removed the needle.

'Oh, so that's what you're doing, I wasn't, I didn't know, you —'

'Please go and wait in the waiting room while it takes effect', said the toothTech, shooing Ariran out of the room with his fingers. Then he mumbled something to his young assistant. Ariran caught a few words. Golf club. Lunch. Twelve-thirty.

In the waiting room, the woman with the loud voice had picked up a magazine. She was flicking through the pages, jerking the pram back and forth with her feet. The front cover had a photograph of a large, detached, stone cottage, surrounded by a beautifully crafted country garden. The assistant entered the waiting room. Told the loud woman she could go.

'BURR I'M S'POSED TO BE HAVIN' A FILLIN'. I'VE HAD A NEEDLE.'

'No, it's okay. The toothTech said it's fine for now. He's, er, he's said there's no need after all. It's fine. Sorry about any confusion.'

The loud woman grinned with relief. Two rows of yellow, decaying teeth. She flung the magazine onto the table. Stood up. Took a rough hold of the baby's pram. Dragged it backwards. Propped the exit door open with her backside. Clattered out of the building. Ariran watched out of the window as she ignored the access ramp and bounced the pram roughly off three stone steps. The baby's head rolled all over the place. Then she marched off down the street, yelling into her mobile phone. *Poor kid,* thought Ariran.

After waiting twenty minutes, he was called back to the chair. The toothTech was all flap and bluster. The drill already whirring in his hand. As he performed his rough excavation, bits of hard amalgam started to ping out. A few fragments flew across the room. Most landed on Ariran's tongue. A large chunk rolled to the back of his throat. In reflex, he swallowed it. The toothTech realized what had happened. 'Get a dam, a dam ... come on girl, come on', he barked at his assistant.

The assistant fumbled in a box on one of the shelves.

'No, no. Just get some cotton wool, quick, quick, come on.'

Trembling, she pulled a couple of inches of cotton wool off the roll. The toothTech snatched it. Rolled it into a rough cylinder. Pushed it to the back of Ariran's throat. It almost choked him. The drilling continued. The stench of hot, mercurial fumes and tooth decay wafted up Ariran's nose. The cotton wool was plucked out. He was commanded to rinse and spit. The dental assistant mixed paste on a board. The toothTech harassed her. 'Come on girl, quick, quick, come on, I haven't got all day.' He looked furtively at his watch. 'Come on, that'll do, here, give it to me.' He snatched the board with the half-mixed paste and packed it into the enormous hole in Ariran's tooth. Minutes later, Ariran was shooed out of the consulting room and told to go home.

The next morning, Ariran woke feeling awful. There was a pain in his head so bad he wanted to scream. He drew the curtains and opened a window to let some air in. The light seared his eyes. He popped a couple of deMetaMal™ and returned to bed, anticipating relief. None came. Three hours later, he was still in bed with a pillow over his head. He prayed for the pain to end. At lunchtime, he took more deMetaMal™. Still no relief. Next, he tried distaFlam™, but to no avail. As the day wore on, he grew increasingly perturbed. George returned home from serviToil. Found him sat on the floor in the lounge, head in hands. 'Are you okay, Ari?'

'No. It's my head. The pain is unreal.'

'A headache? Have you taken some—'

'Yeah, yeah, deMetaMal™, distaFlam™, no use, it's crushing me George.'

'Why don't you get an early night? It'll probably be okay tomorrow.'

'Yeah, okay, I wish I knew what it was. I've never felt anything like it.'

The following morning was no different. George sent a text, 'How's the head?'

'Just pain', Ariran replied. 'Feel dizzy and sick. Tried sleeping but can't.'

Ariran lay in bed, unable to do anything else. There was nothing in his field of experience but the pain in his head. He'd

had headaches before. This was different. He called the mediTech. Luckily, someone had just cancelled, he could be seen that afternoon. The mediTech prescribed deMetaMal™ and sent him on his way. He said it was a strong type. Better than what was available in the shops. If things hadn't improved in a few weeks, Ariran should schedule a further appointment. The prescription was for two hundred and twenty-four deMetaMal™ tablets. Two every four hours, four times per day, for four weeks. When Ariran picked them up, he found they were identical to those he'd tried already. He wondered if the mediTech was trying to get him to kill himself. That would cure his headache alright. Without any other option, he tried taking the pills as prescribed. They didn't help much at all. However, he grew accustomed to being in constant, agonizing pain, and battled through the days to keep the print business ticking over.

The headache lasted three weeks without interruption. Then, Ariran started to feel a crawling sensation in his head. Waves of electric sand being rubbed deep under the skin. Hairs, like inverted maggots, gnawing at his skull. He tried massaging his scalp. Stretching his neck in all directions. But it didn't stop. Neither did the pain. By the fourth week, his vision began to blur intermittently. He struggled on for a further week. Then returned to the mediTech.

The mediTech couldn't explain the headache. Nor the crawling sensation. This time, he sent Ariran away with a prescription for malRedux™. Ariran took them for two weeks. His headache got worse. He called the mediTech. The receptionist told him there were no appointments. Ariran insisted. After putting him on hold, she told him the mediTech thought he was suffering rebound headaches. A prescription for opaKill™ was made ready.

The new medication reduced Ariran's pain from a level of persistent agony to one of constant nuisance. Then came a barrage of awful side effects. Urinating became torturous. There was a constant feeling of pressure on his bladder. He'd go every thirty minutes. Standing over the toilet, straining and whimpering with pain. Most visits were fruitless.

Occasionally, a weak stream emerged. But it brought no relief. He was expecting to see blood. Permanent confusion set in. Disoriented, he found himself climbing the stairs. Forgetting why. Going back down. Climbing up again. At one point, he got trapped in the hallway and shuffled round in circles for almost three hours. Nothing made any sense. His hands were in constant tremor. Even the simplest of things, like making a cup of coffee, required all his effort and concentration. Breaking the process down into smaller, more manageable steps helped. Get the spoon. Take the coffee out of the cupboard. Get the spoon. No, already done that. Take off the lid. Put the coffee in the cup. Spill the coffee. Clean it up. Pour on the water. Damn. Cold water. Pour the cold coffee away. Rinse the cup. Pick up the spoon. Put it down again. Refill the kettle. Switch it on ...

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31. Lucy

Ten days into the opaKill™, Ariran was completely broken. George found him rocking back and forth, bashing his head against the sofa. Not knowing what to do or say, she prepared dinner. He couldn't eat. She noticed a rash on his neck. Tiny red blotches. The internet listed many potential causes. Dermatitis. Meningitis. Sepsis. Leukaemia. 'This is no good,' she said, 'you need to get back to that mediTech.'

'I ... I ... they don't care, George ... look ... I'm losing it ... m-my head hurts so m-much ... I feel like I want to take a drill to it ... to relieve the pressure.'

'Well, you can't sit there rocking like that. What are we going to do?'

'I ... I ... shit, I don't know ... I just ... just need a rest ... wait ... tomorrow ...'

'Okay, we'll give it until tomorrow.'

The next day, the rash had spread to his chest and arms. His confusion worsened. The pain in his skull was so bad, he'd taken to punching himself for relief. George thought Ariran should go to hospiTech but wanted a second opinion. She called Mother.

Mother arrived twenty minutes later. 'What the hell's wrong with you, Ariran?' she asked angrily.

'My head ... the skin ... the crawling, the pain ... I ... feel dizzy.'

'No wonder, with all that walking round in circles,' she tutted.

Ariran was frightened. He was losing control over his body. Over his mind. After a little more coercion from George and Mother, he agreed to go to hospiTech. A paliTech took his information. Then, the three of them sat and waited. The waiting room was two-thirds full. Rows of uncomfortable plastic chairs, bolted to the ground. Large TV, mounted high

on the wall. Silent advertisement playing over and over. The words on the screen said, 'Hurt in an accident? Not your fault? Call us to start your compensation claim now'. Martin's law firm. This was how he earned his beer money. Ariran retched. His leg trembled uncontrollably. He began rocking back and forward. The row of seats squeaked and clunked.

Eventually, he was called for triage. A paliTech checked his rash. 'It doesn't look like much', she said, shining a light into his eyes.

'Ow ... hurts.'

'Response normal. So, you've a headache and this rather unimpressive rash. Is that it?'

'Well ... yeah ... it really hurts, I don't feel right.'

'No. Sure. Okay, go back and sit down. A mediTech will see you. It might be a long wait though. You don't appear to be dying.'

After seven hours, George went home to sleep. Mother waited with him, chuntering endlessly. How terrible things were. He shouldn't have taken drugs when he was younger. What a waste of a life. What a terrible thing he was doing to his wife. A mediTech came. Nothing to worry about, but he wanted to keep Ariran in overnight for observation. Mother went home.

The following day, Ariran was sent for a brain scan. He lay down and was jerked through a large plastic donut, one millimetre at a time. The noisy machine lanced his ears. Pain exploded in the side of his head like a cluster bomb. The scan would be reviewed the next day. He was kept in for another night. The hospiTech withdrew all medication. No opaKill™. No malRedux™. No deMetaMal™. The headache remained, but the tremor, confusion, and difficulty with his bladder subsided. George arrived mid-morning. Ariran was looking perkier. The rash had gone. A paliTech arrived. Asked him to dress and gather his belongings. She walked them through the hospiTech. Took them up a floor in the lift. The cancer unit. Many of the patients were in bed asleep. Hairless, lumpy bodies hooked up to drips.

They were asked to wait in a side room. Two plastic chairs.

A small cupboard. A single bed. The middle of the vinyl-covered, latex mattress had a large hole in. Beneath it, a low commode.

'Why do you think they've brought me here, George? Look at that bed. Do you think this will be my room?'

'We'll have to wait and see.' George bit her lip and stared at the floor. 'Maybe it's the only bed they have free.'

Two young mekaZien mediTechs arrived. They were a little out of breath and looked extremely concerned. 'We've checked your scan,' said the first, 'I'm afraid it's good news and bad news.'

Then the second one spoke, 'Yes. We could find nothing on your scan, your brain is normal.'

'Normal? And the bad news?' asked Ariran.

'That is the bad news,' the first mediTech replied, 'we don't know what's wrong with you. We checked your medical file. It appears you've suffered from depression in the past.'

'Er ... yes ... b-but ... this isn't depression. I know depression. This isn't it. The pain. The crawling in my head. The rash. The difficulty going to the toilet.'

'It looks like your rash is gone. We don't know what that was. Maybe a reaction to the opaKill™.'

'But ... the headache? I mean, I wasn't taking opaKill™ for fun.'

'What we think happened is that you withdrew from antidepressants too soon. They should be withdrawn gradually. We spoke with your mediTech. He said you were taking them for a while and then suddenly stopped.'

'Yeah. I didn't feel I needed them any more, so I stopped. That was a long time ago. Like months before I got the headaches.'

'Well, when taking antidepressants, the brain can adjust its production, stop producing so many happy chemicals, then, when you withdraw, you can experience very low levels and the drugs aren't there to keep the stuff bouncing around. This may explain your initial headache. The pills you were given wouldn't have helped, and they can cause a rebound reaction.'

'But ... I just told you, that was ages ago, I mean way, way

before these headaches started ... this headache isn't depression, nothing like it. I'd been to the dentist and—'

'Headaches can be made worse by painkillers, they call them rebound headaches.'

'Rebound? But even so I—'

'Yes, rebound. For some people, painkillers make things worse. OpaKill™ wouldn't help. Your confusion and other symptoms may have been a bad reaction too.'

'But the dentist, I swallowed some merc—'

'We think you're depressed and need to return to your mediTech. Nothing else we can do for you.'

'So ... but ... why am I here, in this room?'

'We needed somewhere private to speak with you. It was better you came to us rather than us travelling around the hospiTech to find you. We're very busy, I'm sure you understand?'

'Yes, of course but ... the mediTech ... they prescribed those pills, you want me to go back there?'

'Sorry, it's not our business how your mediTech is. Maybe you could find a new one?'

'A new one? Where? I mean, nowhere is taking new patients.'

'We can't help you any further. We're discharging you. Good luck.'

George was relieved. Ariran felt confused and humiliated. He'd ended up in hospiTech because of the medication he'd been given by the mediTech. Nobody had dealt with the headache. It still felt like things were crawling underneath his skin. But there was nowhere else to turn. After a battle with the receptionist, he was given an appointment.

'You again', said the mediTech.

'Yes, I—'

'You've been to hospiTech. Making me look bad! They said there was nothing wrong with you?'

'No. They couldn't find anything wrong. With my brain. From a CT scan. And—'

'So you're back here. Right. I think you need to try antidepressants again.'

'What?'

'Headaches are often a cause of depression.'

'You didn't say that before. And this doesn't feel like—'

'What do you want me to do? They couldn't find anything in the hospiTech could they?'

'Well, they didn't really check much. I mean, what if it's something else?'

'Like what?'

'I don't know, that's why I'm here. I mean the crawling sensation is awful, I'd been to the dentist just before, now the headache just won't—'

'Well, I don't know either. Take the pills, see how it goes. Have you tried skin cream?'

'What for?'

'The itching.'

'It's not itching. It's like a cold, crawling, fizzy sort of feeling. It's weird, deep down. Hard to describe. I wondered if the amalgam was—'

'If it's so difficult to describe, maybe it isn't real.'

'What?'

'Look. Just take the pills and see how it goes. That's the best I can do. Did you need a sick note or something?'

'I serviToil for myself.'

'Ah right. I see', the mediTech scoffed.

Ariran's headache continued as before. The antidepressants lifted his mood a little. He guessed he would just have to live with the pain if he wasn't going to kill himself. Nobody else seemed concerned. Not Mother. Not George. Least of all the mediTech. There was no point mentioning it any more. He wondered how many other people were living with chronic pain. Belittled. Humiliated. Ignored. Dismissed as crackpots. He decided to focus on palliative measures. A dog wouldn't judge him. George was excited about the prospect. They decided to rehome a rescue dog. There were plenty in need. No point creating demand for more to be brought into existence.

They wandered from cage to cage. Each animal looked lonely. Pitiful. George took a shine to a timid-looking

mongrel. Small. Brown and white. The dog was removed from its cage. Ariran crouched down, giving gentle encouragement for it to approach. It padded over slowly. Licked his hand. Touched his nose gently with hers. A doggy kiss. Wow! That was a sign for sure. Ariran picked up the dog's paw. It looked like she'd been injured at some point.

'What's that?' asked George.

'It looks like a scar, I guess she's been hurt in the past', he replied.

'No, not the dog. On your head. There's a bald spot.'

'On my head? Where?'

'At the back, here.' George poked Ariran's head with a cold finger.

'Oh, yeah. I can feel that ... I don't know, maybe I slipped with the clippers.' Ariran turned back to the dog. 'Aren't you gorgeous! Would you like to come and live with us?'

The bitch tilted her head. Her ears pricked up. Her little tail started wagging. George and Ariran fell in love with her. They paid a deposit to ensure she wouldn't be put to sleep. A home inspection was to be arranged before they could collect her.

Back home, Ariran tried to examine the bald spot. He stood before the bathroom mirror and used one of George's make-up mirrors to view the back of his head. The patch was low down, behind his ear. No sign of stubble. It didn't look like he'd slipped with the clippers. He decided to wait and see if the hair grew back.

That week, he set about ensuring the garden fence was secure. George bought a dog's bed and two bowls. She wanted to call her Lucy. Her long-dead great Aunt's name. Ariran thought it was a weird reason, but Lucy was a good name for a dog, so he agreed. They passed the home inspection and made arrangements to collect the dog soon after. Lucy was led out on a rope to meet them.

'Wow, she looks ... big', said Ariran.

'Yeah', agreed George. 'Hello, little Lucy, aren't you gorgeous? Have you put weight on?'

'She looks pregnant to me', said one of the staff.

'Don't be silly', said another one, digging her elbow into the

ribs of the first.

'Probably just needs some exercise', Ariran said.

'Well, you're coming home with us now. Come on. Let's go', said George.

Ariran walked Lucy twice a day. He checked her weight and ensured she was fed appropriately. She was a good dog. A fast learner. Still, she seemed to grow and grow. After two weeks, George and Ariran took her to the theriTech to have her checked out.

'Pregnant!' exclaimed the theriTech. His fingers groping around Lucy's lower abdomen. 'There's one, two, three, four, five, six ... at least six in there. You're going to have your hands full.'

'But how?' asked George.

'Come on, you're both grown adults, I'm sure you know how it all works.'

'No, I mean, she's a rescue dog, she's been there for over two months.'

'She's well pregnant, no doubt about that', the theriTech replied. 'It could've happened just before she went in. Sometimes, if they're nervous, they suck it all in to try to hide it.'

'But, shouldn't they have told us?' protested George.

'I guess. If they knew. But things can be missed. Especially there. They aren't the brightest bunch.'

The pair were shell-shocked. Six puppies! They'd made a home for one dog, not seven. George called the rescue centre. They could take Lucy back immediately, but she'd have to stay until the puppies were eight weeks old. George and Ariran couldn't do it. Lucy had settled. How could they dump her back there? It would be traumatic. George asked if the rescue centre would help with the cost of raising the puppies. Maybe they could give them some puppy food. Once they'd raised them to eight weeks, they would bring them in to be re-homed. Puppies were always in high demand. George and Ariran would do the hard work. The rescue centre would make a few hundred maudaTech easily. It seemed like a fair deal. But the manager at the rescue centre was a horrible woman.

Hard-faced and bitter. Not the sort of person anybody would expect to be caring for animals. She refused to entertain the idea. Either they took Lucy back and collected her eight weeks after the puppies had been born, or they dealt with everything themselves at their own expense.

Lucy's waters broke late one night. Ariran was reading in the lounge; a gripping revelation of corruption at the heart of the Secret Service. They were supposed to be experts in intelligence. Capable of judging a person accurately from bodily cues and short conversations. Yet, they couldn't even vet their own staff. Lucy was restless. Kept nudging Ariran with her nose. He'd failed to understand, too engrossed in his book. Suddenly, there was water everywhere. The first puppy emerged soon after. A gorgeous little bitch. Lucy tried to reach back to snip the cord with her teeth. It was instinct. But she was so large she couldn't reach. Ariran was prepared. Everything was set out on the sideboard ready. He mustered up some courage and snipped the cord. Then he dabbed the end with disinfectant and handed the puppy to her mum. Lucy cleaned the puppy's eyes and nose with her tongue. The puppy took her first breath and yelped into life. Then the second puppy came. A third. Then a fourth. A fifth. A sixth.

George heard the yelps and came to see. She'd been asleep and was due to serviToil early the next day. After stroking the newborns, she went back to bed. Ariran waited up. A couple of hours passed. Another fluffy ball appeared. Seven! George got up at four-thirty. Trouble sleeping. Seeing that Ariran was exhausted, she sent him to bed. Ariran was glad for the break. He got up again at six-thirty, so George could get ready to serviToil. When he entered the living room, he was astonished. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven ... eight ... nine ... ten ... eleven. Eleven puppies!

The new arrivals led to some busy weeks for Ariran. Four feeds a day and constant cleaning. Hardly the palliative measure he wanted, but it distracted him from his headache. Once the puppies were old enough, arrangements were made to take them to the rescue centre to be re-homed. On arrival, the manager met them. It was the hard-faced, horrible

woman. 'You got them weaned then?' she grunted without a smile.

'Yeah, they started solids at four weeks', Ariran replied.

'Four weeks? I don't think so.'

'Yeah, it was, actually. Four weeks. We mixed the solids and milk. By five weeks, they were on full solids. No trouble.'

'Impossible.'

'I'm not lying to you. Why would I? You can see them all here. Don't they look fine? We even brought the spare food for you.'

'We can't use it.'

'Why not?'

'Not if it's opened. It could be poisoned.'

'It's what they've been eating. Why would I bring poisoned food?'

'Throw it away. They'll get what we give them now. You'd better unload them. Bring them in here.' She showed Ariran to a small brick cell inside one of the kennel buildings. Heavy iron door. Concrete floor with a drain built in. Nothing else. No bedding. No paper. No straw. No towels. Nothing. Just bare concrete and brick walls.

He wanted to puke as he carried the puppies to the little cell. Leaving them with that nasty bitch felt like a cruel betrayal, but taking them back home wasn't an option. They couldn't afford so many dogs. There was no time for him to find homes for them elsewhere. He had to crack on with his business. The pups started shaking. Fear. The cold. Or some combination. A couple of pups tried to make a break for it, running toward Ariran yelping. The woman knocked them back with her fat boot and slammed the iron door shut.

Ariran drove home dazed. That horrible woman! Surely they vetted these people? These nasty idiots seemed to get everywhere. Government. Managing companies. Running charities. High up in the Secret Service. Managing animal rescue centres. MediTech receptionists. MediTechs. ToothTechs. It was clear that nature selected for insensitivity and cruelty. After all, the heartless were capable of doing things to survive that others would never contemplate. But

the kutKish had no need to kowtow to nature's bad sense, nor its irrational charade of purpose. They could organize society. Filter these elements out. Why didn't they do something about it?

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32. Driver

The bald patch on Ariran's head grew. From the size of two fingertips to the size of a palm. Two more patches appeared. Ariran was reluctant to visit the mediTech. The very thought made his stomach churn. Once again, George insisted. At least this time there was something clearly visible he could show. They couldn't dismiss that as mental illness.

'Ah. It looks like alopecia', said the mediTech.

'Alopecia?'

'Yes, alopecia areata. I don't know much about it. We'll refer you to a dermaTech. It'll take a while, could be up to six months.'

'Six months. Oh. Is it contagious? Is there anything I can do in the meantime?'

'No. You can't catch it. It's a systemic disorder. Maybe an allergy to something. Sorry, there's nothing more I can suggest. We'll need you to make an appointment for a blood test to rule out any other underlying conditions. By the way, are you taking drugs?'

'No ... you mean ... I mean ... just antidepressants.'

'Recreational drugs?'

'No. Nothing. Is that relevant?'

'Well, it wouldn't help, but it's more the risk of infection, you know, hepatitis and the like, we need to rule out other causes. They can affect people with mood swings. Those little moments of reckless behaviour can ruin a life you know.'

'I'm sorry, are you suggesting—'

'Oh, no. Not at all. We do see you regularly, though, don't we?'

'More often than I'd like, that's for sure. I still have a headache. Don't you think it's odd that my hair has fallen out after I started getting headaches?'

'Not really, probably coincidence. Headaches aren't

unusual. Have you tried painkillers?'

Ariran's blood test came back. The results were 'fine'. High white cell count. Possibly a sign of recent infection. Nothing to worry about. With the puppies gone, and nothing further he could do about his health, Ariran focused on his business. Sales were going well. Summer was fast approaching. The warmer the weather, the more t-shirts he sold. He'd begun work on a series of new designs when, overnight, orders stopped coming in. All his items had disappeared from the online marketplace. A customer service agent explained that the shop listings he'd been using were no longer permitted. They'd been cheap. Just a few maudaCent per month. Now they'd changed policy. Only standard listings or auction listings would be allowed. They cost a minimum of one maudaTech each. Almost thirty times more per item. The change would increase his costs by several hundred maudaTech, wiping out most of his profit. Notice was given on page seven of a document, linked from an email, sent two weeks prior. He hadn't read it, not that he would have had time to do much about it. Either way, he now had no other viable outlet for sales. Pay per click advertising was too costly. It was a death blow. He needed a plan B.

'A truck driver? Are you kidding?' George was shocked.

'Sure, they say you can earn good money. I couldn't bear being stuck behind a desk again, and we need cash fast. I can get trained in a few weeks and, provided I pass the test, I could be earning in less than two months.'

George folded her arms in disbelief. 'How much is that going to cost?'

'The rest of my redundancy money plus a few hundred more on the credit card. You'd need to cover all the bills while I train. But I could earn okay money afterwards. More than that hellish insurance serviToil paid anyway.'

'But what about the printing?'

'I've no way of selling. I mean, if I had enough money, and a few months, I could look into other outlets, take another chance. But it's taught me a lesson. These tech people control everything. They can change policies and charges on a whim.

Leave you swinging in the wind overnight.'

'Surely they can't do that to everyone. They wouldn't have any customers.'

'No. They're driving business abroad where it's cheaper. Or forcing people to scale up. If I increased my sales fifty-fold, it would work. But I'd need a bank loan to fund it, premises, extra insurance, staff. I'd just end up creating my own machine and trapping myself in it. Beholden to the bank. Feeding the greed of the tech companies. If it worked, someone would just copy me, but in a country with cheaper costs. I'd be out of business in a week and lumbered with a debt bomb.'

'Well then, I suppose I don't really have a choice but to agree. But, Ariran, this truck driving has to work. When's all this going to end? We've got piles of debt already.'

'I'm trying. I've been unwell. I've still got this damned headache. My hair is falling out. We had to look after all those puppies. This wasn't a change I created, you know? I guess being self-employed is no protection from abuse of power after all. You know, some support would be nice.'

'You think I'm not supporting you! I'm making sure the bills are being paid while you flap around with these half-wit ideas.'

'Well, what do you suggest I do? I took a chance. It was beginning to work out. Can't you see things a bit more deeply than just money?'

'We can't live without money, Ariran.'

'I know. That's how they control the game. That's how they oppress—'

'Will you stop with all that *they do this* and *they do that?* I just need to know the bills will be paid.'

'Can't you try love instead of fear for once? What would you be doing now if all your hair was falling out? I saw you spend nearly an hour preening at the weekend. Styling your hair. Plucking your eyebrows. Thickening your eyelashes by microns with black goo. Do you think it would be so unimportant if it was happening to you? Besides, if all it comes down to is running on a treadmill and paying the bills.

If there's nothing else more important. Count me out. I don't want that sort of life.'

'You want a divorce?'

'That's not what I said. I said I want out. I love you, but this world is not my home. I won't live as a slave being sucked dry until there's nothing left. I won't do it.'

'Okay, okay. Get on with what you've planned if you think it'll make you happy.'

'Happy? Now that *would* be something. I don't expect to be happy at all. I just think it could be manageable. It may even be a route out of this awful country. We could go somewhere warmer. More space. Fewer people. Cheaper houses.'

'I don't want to emigrate. My family are here.'

'It's just an idea, that's all. At least let me have a dream.'

In truth, Ariran had begun to wonder whether moving abroad might help his health. His hair loss was getting worse. Half his head hair was gone. It wasn't anything like normal male balding. It was patchy and uneven, almost resembling a map of the world. He shaved his head daily to make it less obvious. Large bald patches appeared on his legs. He could no longer grow a full beard, but had enough facial hair for a goatee. And he still had eyebrows. However, he'd experienced several unpleasant incidents already. One at the supermarket checkout. Two women behind him made nasty remarks about him having syphilis. Or lice. They moved to another queue. Ariran tried to ignore them, but they were so loud everyone could hear. He felt his face flush with embarrassment. People walking past his house had also become abusive. Pointing. 'That patchy junkie.' Nodding. 'He's faking cancer.' Scowling. 'Keep away from him, you might catch something.' Spitting.

The more people stripped him of his dignity, the more he thought about people. A pattern emerged. The less intelligent they were, the more cruel and aggressively they behaved. Many of them were like wind-up dolls, triggered to blurt out some crass comment on the most trivial of prompts. A good portion of them were incapable of thinking before they spoke. He wondered if they had any internal awareness at all.

Perhaps they were biological androids, designed to repeat cliches and reinforce the memes they'd learnt from TV. They might claim to be self-aware, but who could prove it?

The appointment with the consultant dermaTech came through. Finally, Ariran had the opportunity to talk to someone. He couldn't get support from Tenebray. She was a bitch. Mother was a bitch too, and a child. George was no good at emotional support. She never had been. Both Mother and George only seemed capable of expressing care using food. A fallback most kutKish had. As though food was the be-all and end-all in matters of the heart and mind. In truth, it was a shield for ignorance; denial of the soul.

The dermaTech was empathetic, showing concern about his loss of self-confidence. The abuse he'd suffered wasn't uncommon. Treatments were limited; the disease was not well understood. Hair loss as extensive as his was likely to get worse. Recovery was rare. His heart sank. Almost completely bald in his thirties. Even his goatee was falling out. The last bastion of his manhood. He guessed it could be worse. Some people in the waiting room were in terrible condition. Bodies covered with lesions and sores. Scaly. Flaking. Red. Sore. Inflamed. Bleeding. Those poor people were suffering every second of every day.

Seeing so many of life's victims reminded him of his childhood. He'd had no control over his environment. The suffering was extensive. Mother was a paradox. Incredibly untidy and unsanitary; carelessly liberal with cleaning chemicals. On her infrequent blitzes, she would spray oodles of caustic spray all over the place. Barely wipe it up, never mind rinse it off. Bathroom cleaner. Furniture polish. Bleach. Floor cleaner. When she styled her hair, she sprayed clouds of sticky, toxic hairspray into the air. Usually in their shared bedroom. She laundered with biological washing powder. Used far too much of it. Ariran was under constant biochemical attack. If he complained, she laughed at him.

Once, she was so careless that she murdered his goldfish. He'd won it by throwing a ping pong ball into a jar at the local carnival. Father had paid for the game after a rare win on the

horses. He paraded Ariran and his fish around for hours, making a point of who paid for the game. Christopher, the goldfish, lived for four years. Ariran spoke with him every day. Then, Mother put the fish in a jar of water. Cleaned its tank with bleach. Failed to rinse it properly. Threw the fish back in. He found it, laying dead on the carpet. Its bleached skin covered in blisters from the chemical burns. The surface of its eyes had turned white like poached eggs. It killed itself through suffocation to escape that bitch's careless chemical torture.

Ariran tried to forget about his appearance. He commenced an intensive four-week truck driving course. Three hours each morning. Three in the afternoon. He had to learn theory and driving legislation in his own time. On his third week, Ariran noticed a damaged wagon at the far end of the yard. The front was completely caved in. Gone over a bridge too fast. Only twenty miles per hour, but the other side had a sharp turn. He was carrying a full load. Ended up in the front room of someone's house. They survived. The driver was badly injured. They needed someone new to fill his role.

The driving test went well. Passed first time. Ariran rushed home to tell George. 'I passed and they offered me serviToil.'

George grinned. 'That's great! Oooh, where will you be driving to?'

'They're going to keep me local for the first week. Then, it could be anywhere in the country.'

Her expression changed. She looked worried. 'Will you be going abroad?'

'No. But there are nights out.'

'Nights out?'

'Yeah. Overnight stops. I get twenty maudaTech a night for a meal and parking. Most of the drivers find a lay-by to stop in. Depends where you are. I can stay at a truck stop or hotel, but I'd have to pay for anything over twenty out of my own pocket.'

'Seriously? I mean, if I get sent away to a conference or training, they pay my accommodation and meals, it's only right.'

'Welcome to the lower classes.'

'Don't you even get paid for the hours you're away? I mean, it's company time still. It's not like you can live your own life in a truck stop or a lay-by.'

'You're joking. Unless you're doing a delivery, you're not considered to be serviToiling at all.'

'But ... aren't you responsible for the truck ... I mean, it's like you have to be an on-call security guard for free?'

'Of course. I'm responsible for the truck. For the load. No life. No extra pay. That's how it works.'

'It's like a different world.'

'Yeah, I know. It's just how it is. Most of the drivers are out for two or three nights a week. It mounts up to well over four hundred hours per month. Around half is considered serviToil. Some drivers have kids. They only get to spend a few hours with them at the weekend.'

'That sucks.'

'What doesn't?'

'When do you get paid?'

'Weekly. But new starters get paid on the second week. They hold back the first week as ransom.'

'Eh?'

'In case you leave at short notice, or damage goods or anything. Then they won't pay you. If you leave on good terms, it should be paid the week after you go.'

His first week went smoothly. Short runs to a local agricultural supplier. The following week, he was sent on an extra errand. The driver of an estate car flagged him down. 'Where are you going, mate?'

'What's it to you?'

'New driver are you?'

'Yeah. How'd you know?'

'You've not been down this road before, have you?'

'No.'

'In two minutes time, you'd come across a low bridge. The speed you were travelling, you'd hit it.'

'Oh. I see.'

'There's a large gravel lay-by a little further on. You can

turn around there.'

'Okay. Thanks. I appreciate it.'

'It's not for your benefit. I hate this road being closed for weeks while they do repairs. Happens every fucking year. It's a fifteen-minute detour.'

The logistics manager was grinning when Ariran arrived back at the depot. 'I see you almost found the bridge then?'

'Oh ... er ... yeah, I ... how did you know?'

'We were watching on the monitor. All the vehicles are tracked. Real time. You were going a good pace! I was getting ready to call you when you pulled over and turned around. Realized just in time eh?'

'Oh, I ... there was a guy who flagged me down.'

'You didn't see the road signs? Don't let it happen again! The boss won't be happy. Neither will the poliTech. The fireTech. The insurance company. Or the other drivers.'

'Yeah. Course not ... I will.'

'Remember, you're not driving a car! On the QT. If you find you arrive at a low bridge, and it's a pain to turn back, you can try letting the tyres down. Only if it's a couple of inches you need for clearance.'

'Oh, really?'

'That didn't come from me, got it?'

The following week, he was sent further afield. The wagon had a full load. As rush hour commenced, he hit a prolonged incline on the motorway. The temperature gauge on the dashboard flickered into the red. The truck refused to go faster than forty-five. Other drivers got annoyed. Some honked their horns. A couple gave him the finger. One threw half a cup of coffee at his windscreen. His serviToil mobile rang.

'WHAT THE BLOODY HELL ARE YOU PLAYING AT?' shouted the logistics manager.

'What?'

'I'm tracking you here on the monitor. Forty-five on the motorway, what the hell?'

Ariran lost his temper. 'THIS THING WON'T GO ANY FASTER. I'VE GOT MY FOOT TO THE FLOOR. THE

TEMPERATURE IS IN THE RED. ALL I'VE GOT IS ALL THESE CUNTS BEEPING AND SWEARING AT ME. WHAT ARE YOU PLAYING AT, SENDING ME OUT IN THIS HEAP OF SHIT!?'

'What? Are you in the right gear?'

'OF COURSE I AM. DON'T YOU PEOPLE CHECK THESE THINGS BEFORE YOU SEND US OUT IN THEM?'

'Alright, bald boy, keep your hair on. Get them deliveries done. We'll check it when you get back in.'

So much for life on the open road! Monitored. Tracked. Verbally abused. It wasn't even his fault. And worse. The delay meant he had to spend the night at a service station. Twelve maudaTech just for parking. It was a hot day. The dust and fumes had been intense. Ariran could feel the sting of his sweat as it dripped into his sore, red eyes. He was desperate for a wash.

The checkout girl in the cafe kept the shower key in her till. She winked and smiled as she passed it to him. When he ventured inside, he almost changed his mind. It was a state. Black mould everywhere. The mirror on the wall was cracked. Several shards missing. The floor felt slimy. A single hook was screwed into the back of the heavily graffitied door. Ariran hung his towel carefully, worried it would fall into the slime. At top power, the shower produced a slight dribble. Lukewarm water. It soon turned cold. It took him thirty frustrating minutes to wash all the dust and grime off. He balanced on his shoes to dry himself. His skin turned purple due to the cold. Then he saw himself in the broken mirror. A huge bald patch in his chest hair. He shuffled closer to get a better look. At least nobody would see it. Then he noticed another bald patch. His eyebrow. It looked weird. He dressed and hurried back to the truck. Climbed in the back of the cab. Pulled the curtains tightly shut.

33. Quit

Six weeks into driving, Ariran was tasked with a long-distance run. The truck needed to be on the road by four-thirty in the morning. It took forty minutes to drive to the depot in his car. So, he left home at three thirty, six hours after he'd arrived home the previous day. By four a.m., he was almost there. A familiar winding road through a small village. He heard a low rumble. A shadow loomed out of the darkness. It was in the centre of the road. Headed straight for his car. A tractor. Ariran swerved onto the pavement. There was a loud crack. The huge tractor tyre smashed his wing mirror. A narrow escape. He banged on his car horn. The tractor didn't stop. It had no number plates. He wanted to chase it but couldn't afford to be late for serviToil. Besides, there were no witnesses. He couldn't prove a thing.

When he arrived at the depot, it was completely dark. The main gate was locked. Ariran keyed in the entry code with a trembling finger. The gate slid open. He parked the damaged car and went to find his truck. It had been left in front of the warehouse. Fully loaded. Ready to go. He pulled back a side curtain to examine the cargo. Giant reams of paper, each wrapped in a waxy brown covering. Stacked in piles eight feet high. None of it strapped down. The straps were hanging loose from the centre of the truck's roof. They were essential to stop the load moving around. He couldn't reach them, the cargo blocked access. When he tried climbing over the reams, they started sliding around. From the top of the stack to the floor was a twelve-foot drop.

Ariran wondered what to do. There was nobody to ask. If he didn't set off immediately, he wouldn't have time to fulfil his schedule. Tired and shaken from the close call with the tractor, he felt impelled to leave. Maybe the side curtains would hold everything until his first drop. Then, there would

be space to get in and access the straps.

Things went well for the first few hundred miles. Traffic was sparse. The radio played good music. He left the motorway to join a minor road. It twisted more than expected. After several sharp bends, his side curtains began to bulge slightly but nothing fell. They were keeping things in place. While negotiating a tight left-hand bend, a car suddenly appeared. Wrong side of the road. Heading straight toward him. Overtaking a tractor. For the second time that day, Ariran swerved onto the pavement. He broke hard. His fast thinking created a small gap for the car to squeeze through. The car sped off. The tractor driver shrugged and trundled past. Ariran took a deep breath and checked his mirrors. His load had toppled. Now the curtains were bulging two feet out. There was nothing he could do about it. He drove on into the city.

The journey took longer than it should because the truck couldn't fit in the tight city lanes with the extra width. He had to straddle two lanes at a time, much to the annoyance of everyone else on the road. When he arrived at his drop point, he was tired and frustrated. It was nine thirty in the morning. A factory foreman approached, shaking his head. After inspecting the bulges, he walked up to the cab. 'What's happ'n' 'ere?'

'Looks like it slipped', Ariran replied, glibly.

'Yeah, well, we cannay accep' tha' pal. I divnae see huw we ken git a focklif' to unload tha' mess 'n' we divnae ha time fo' handballin'.'

Hand-balling meant unloading by hand. Ariran had done it a few times. Small building sites. Backstreet distributors. People who didn't have the room or money for a forklift.

'I'll open the curtains and see what you think', Ariran said, climbing down from the cab.

The foreman poked his head into the back of the truck. 'Noo way pal, it's a mess in 'ere! Fyoo pall tha' curt'n back any ma it'll aw fa' oot. Some's damaged tae. We cannay accep' this.'

Ariran called his boss.

'What do you mean they won't accept the delivery?'

Ariran explained about the bulge. That he couldn't reach the straps. That there was nobody at the depot. He'd had to leave.

'YOU FUCKING IDIOT! DON'T BE TELLING ME YOU COULDN'T CLIMB UP AND GET THE STRAPS!'

'It ... it ... was dangerous, I would have slipped off.'

'FOR FUCK'S SAKE!' The boss sucked air through his teeth. 'Now what? Have you got the spools off yet?'

'Spools?'

'Two pallets aren't paper, they're cotton spools. See if you can get them delivered, then get back here with the rest.'

'But—'

'Just do it.' He hung up.

Ariran set off to try to deliver the spools. A four-hour drive. Some seedy garment sweatshop at the end of a residential street. Overhanging trees. Kids playing. Double-parked. Dead end. Barely enough room to get down, let alone stop and unload. Now he had bulging side curtains to contend with too.

Four and a half hours later, he arrived in the delivery area. He couldn't find the right road. After driving around the block several times, he pulled into a nearby industrial estate, intending to take a breather. It was different to what he'd expected. Old, red-brick buildings and dirt tracks. No wide roads, turning points, or parking spaces. Not like modern industrial estates. Ariran searched for somewhere to stop, but there was no space. The road came to an end. Ahead, the entrance to a car dealership. No room to turn the wagon around. The dealership driveway looped around the showroom and back out onto the road. A potential solution. Ariran drove forward through a narrow, red-brick archway. The driveway was much narrower than he'd anticipated. Barely the width of the truck. Rows of expensive cars were parked on both sides. The corners of the wagon were only a hair's width from the shiny new motors. Zero room for error.

Suddenly, Ariran felt strange. He looked at his reflection in the rearview mirror, then down at his hands. It wasn't him.

Just a weird, waxy corpse. The thing was hunched over. Dead eyes. He was inside. Looking out. But they weren't his. He was trapped in a carcass. It was sending him sensations. Headache. Pain in the neck. Stinging eyes. Terrible tiredness. Swollen eyelids that wanted to close. He wanted to get out of it. Go home. Leave the corpse to rot. A rapid series of questions dripped through his mind.

Why am I in this mannequin, driving a truck dangerously around a car sales forecourt, hundreds of miles from home? What is this place? This city? This country? This planet? Why is it so damned hot? Why is my hair falling out? What will I do without eyebrows? Why all the pain? Who am I really? What am I? Who was that woman I married? Is she real? What is that brick box we live in? All those brick boxes, all tightly packed together, is it really a prison? Why does nothing feel real here? How do I find my true home? Do I even have one? How do I stop this, I don't want to be here?

Sleep called. His eyelids flickered. He wanted to let go. Fly away to another realm. A place without sorrow. He had to keep his eyes open. To drive the truck. A surge of anger. His neck and head twitched. Why not press hard on the accelerator? Cause mayhem. He was sick of tight spaces. Sick of being constricted, constrained, and controlled. Desperate to be free. With its load, the truck weighed over thirty tonnes. He could smash through those fancy cars. Burst through the wall. Explode into the road. Plough through the traffic. Head out into the countryside. Set the damned truck alight. Wander off into the hills.

When his apocalyptic reverie faded, Ariran was shocked to find he'd navigated the entire road around the forecourt. Hadn't so much as clipped anything. He'd stopped before the same brick arch he'd entered under. Engine purring. But to get out required a different angle than getting in. It would be impossible without hitting the sides of the arch. He couldn't back up. There was no alternative. He took a deep breath. Put his foot down. Aimed his best. The bulge in the side curtains got knocked back into place. There was a clatter from the guard bars on the back of the truck. He was through. On the

left, the wall had cracked slightly. On the right, a pile of bricks lay on the floor near the hole he'd left. An obese salesman came bouncing out of the showroom. A stringy manager accompanied him. Both were flapping their arms in panic.

The manager spoke first. 'WHA' THA' FOOK ARE YOO DOIN'? LOOK A' THA' WA'!'

Ariran didn't care. Not about this. Not about anything. He glanced back casually. 'Oh ... yeah, was that me?'

A second salesman appeared. He'd been checking the cars. 'No sign of damage boss, not to the cars at least.'

'HA' THA' FOOK DID THA' FUCKA MANAGE THA'? ARE YE SURE?'

'Yeah. There's not a scratch on any of them.'

The manager stared at Ariran in disbelief. 'Ah fook it. Jus' fook off will ye.'

'Sure thing', replied Ariran.

The three men turned around and began inspecting the hole in the wall. Ariran fucked off. He drove around in circles again, looking for the delivery address for the pallets of spools. A local skolOpticon had let out. The streets were full of young, energetic kids in messy uniforms. Ripped trousers. Short skirts. Ketchup stains. Cut-off ties. As Ariran rounded the same corner for the fifth time, two kids stepped out in front of him. He slammed on the brakes. Honked his horn. 'WATCH WHERE YOU'RE GOING YOU LITTLE PRICKS!' he shouted, shaking his fist out of the window.

He'd often wondered why so many professional drivers seemed so angry. Now he knew. They were shouted at. Abused. Pressured. Confused. Tired. Expected to achieve the impossible. Breathing toxic traffic fumes all day long. Nothing but instant noodles, a stinking sponge mattress, and a night in a shady lay-by to look forward to. No wonder he felt like a soulless mannequin. He abandoned the delivery. It wasn't safe. He had to go home and find out who he was. To feel real again. Like he actually belonged in that waxy, numb body. If he drove the whole journey at the speed limit, he would make it back to the depot before his driving hours ran out. Home for the weekend. He pictured Lucy's tail wagging. Getting a big

hug from George. He could go with her to see her grandfather in the morning. Cedric was having his ninetieth breathDay.

After battling the rush hour traffic, and getting a good run on the motorway, the truck came to a halt. From his high position, Ariran could see an accident ahead. A nasty pileup. Two sports cars and a four-wheel drive. Idiots who thought they were invincible. They'd passed ten minutes earlier, racing each other.

Ariran called George. 'I'm sorry. Bad traffic. I'm not going to make it back.'

'Oh, that's a shame. How's your day been?'

'I don't have the words. It's good to hear your voice.'

'Where are you?'

'About halfway. I've been sat in stationary traffic for ninety minutes. George, I ... I've had enough. I'm sick of this. I want to be home. To be at the party tomorrow. Now I'm going to miss it.'

'Well, get yourself parked up, get some sleep. There'll be other times.'

'No, Cedric will never have another ninetieth. The consequences are eternal.'

'He'll understand. I'm sure he'll make it to ninety-one.'

'Maybe. Hey, maybe in another universe, I get home. Get to spend the weekend with my family. Just not in this one.'

'Er, yeah. Well, take care. I guess I'll see you Monday when I get back.'

'Guess so.'

Ariran stopped at the next motorway services. The shower was out of order. He stripped to the waist and washed himself over the sink, trying to ignore the suffocating stench of urine and shit. Less than half of each eyebrow left. Armpit hair gone. A man emerged from a cubicle, glared at him, and mumbled, 'I'm sick of fucking weirdo queers.' Ariran had given up trying to learn to speak stupid. It was a language he just couldn't grasp, so he didn't respond. He dried and dressed. Bought an overpriced, stale sandwich. Took it back to his cab. It was hot and humid. No aircon. Had to keep his windows open. Constant slamming of car doors. Blaring stereos.

Revving engines. Loud, aggressive voices. A restless, rest stop.

The following morning, he drove back to the depot. The truck kept veering onto the rumble strips. Nerves were shot. Hadn't slept a wink. He parked at an odd angle outside the logistics office. Kicked open the door. Marched to the counter. Slammed down his time sheet and truck keys. The office went silent. Ariran took a deep breath. Let it out. Spoke as calmly as he could. 'I'm done. Goodbye.' Nobody said a thing. He walked out to his damaged car and drove away.

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34. Refuse

'Get up! Get up! That poor girl's in pieces. Get up! Get up! Get up, you good for nothing!' demanded Mother, spitting bile from her screwed up face.

'Leave me be, will you?' Ariran pleaded.

'You need to get up! Sort yourself out. Quitting all the time! What's wrong with you?'

'You tell me. Do you think I'd be here if there was nothing wrong? I'm fucking tired. Fuck off and leave me alone.'

'How dare you! Get up. Look what you're doing to that poor girl.' She pulled the bedroom curtains open and marched out of the room.

George told her. How he'd quit trucking. How she found him sleeping after returning from visiting her grandfather. How he'd been in bed the whole weekend, save for the occasional shuffle to the toilet. How little he'd said. Ariran pulled the duvet over his head to muffle the sound of Mother's angry tones as she spoke with George downstairs. George thanked her for coming and sent her home.

Ariran's body ached all over. Weird pains were shooting down his arms and legs. His mind was a thick fog. Mother's heartless cajoling sucked the last remaining energy from his heart.

'Hey ... I'm sorry about your mum,' said George, 'I didn't know what to do and thought she could help. I didn't think she'd be a cow like that.'

'Fuck that bitch. You see what I had to grow up with? She's a fucking heartless dimwit.'

'Yeah, I see it now. Do you think going to the mediTech would help?'

'Seriously? You know they couldn't care less. Remember the opaKill™? I'm still on those damned antidepressants. Whatever good they're supposed to be doing ... I'm so tired.'

'What will you do?'

'I can't think ... I need to rest.'

George left Ariran to rest. She took him a cooked meal each evening. Sometimes he would eat a little. Sometimes nothing. He didn't wash or change his clothes. The following weekend, he dragged himself to the shower. Clean and slightly refreshed, he went downstairs. Fixed a coffee. Booted up his computer. By the time he sat down, he was utterly exhausted. His head ached more than ever. There was a constant stabbing pain in his chest. Bed was calling. But he could no longer rest. He had to do something. Several cups of coffee later, he'd managed to prepare a short CV and email it to a temping agency.

The agency called the following Monday. They wanted Ariran to attend the office. To meet him in person. Luckily, the appointment was late morning. With three strong cups of coffee inside him, he was half functioning when he arrived. They offered him a trucking contract. Fifty-five hours a week. Minimum pay. He politely declined. Next, data processing for a recycling firm. Forty hours, minimum pay, but no need to answer telephones or drive a truck. Ariran accepted and agreed to start the next day.

In the morning, he peeled himself out of bed and threw some clothes on. Despite getting an early night, his body felt like he'd competed in a triathlon. His head was sore and fuzzy. Worse than any hangover he'd ever experienced. He ate a spoonful of dried coffee. Washed it down with a glass of water. Drove to serviToil.

The office manager met him in the warehouse reception to show him around. They started on the ground floor. Conveyor belts and skips. It stank of decaying refuse. Flies everywhere. A couple of gnarly youths wearing thick rubber gloves were sifting waste. They grinned, or snarled, he wasn't sure. Next, the break area. A partitioned corner of the warehouse. Vending machine. Sink. Kettle. Two cheap, plastic garden chairs. Filthy. Infested with flies. The wall behind the sink was plastered with grotty pictures of girls with their tits out. Adjacent was a lone toilet cubicle. Several flies were crawling

up the inside of the small frosted-glass window in the door. Ariran calculated he'd have just enough time to get home, use his own toilet, and get back to work during lunch hour.

Finally, he was taken upstairs to the data-processing office. It was at the end of a long corridor and looked like a large storage cupboard. Bare brick walls. Corrugated metal roof. No windows or vents. The heat was stifling. Two large fans were placed on top of cupboards, recirculating dusty, humid air. In one corner was a portable gas fire, ready for colder days. Two young girls sat in front of antiquated monitors. An older lady sat behind a large desk near the far wall. She was the supervisor. Karen. She showed Ariran his tasks—working through boxes of paper receipts from skip wagons. Inputting the information into the computer. Simple.

Karen introduced Ariran to the two young girls. Neither of them spoke when he said hello. One of them turned in his direction. She wore a cheap, blue polyester shirt. Unbuttoned half way. Damp patches of sweat under her arms, and down the middle where it had dripped from her cleavage. She grinned and opened her legs. Her black skirt slid up the sweat on her thighs, riding all the way to her buttocks. No underwear. The bright glare of fluorescent lighting reflected off her dripping thighs, illuminating the wavy fronds of her labia. He thought that if he lay his cock there, it would look like a slug's foot.

Each morning, Ariran dragged himself into the office. Took a flask of strong coffee to fight his fatigue. Kept a large plastic bottle in his car so he didn't have to use the toilet cubicle. Clacked away on the keyboard. Each day, more tired than the last. By the middle of the third week, he relapsed into deep exhaustion. Failed to get up. Ignored the voicemail messages. He didn't know what to tell them. He was lost for any explanation himself. Nobody could help. It would be madness going through the humiliation of visiting the mediTech again. Mother was a bitch. George was engulfed with her own worries. He daren't tell her he wanted to die. He lay in bed, hoping a plane would drop out of the sky and land on him.

After three days of gentle nagging, George managed to

persuade him once again.

The mediTech leant forward in his chair. 'Yes, Ariran, it must be your depression, it seems to be worse.'

'But I'm already on antidepressants. I'm not depressed. I'm tired. Exhausted.'

'Yes, that's common with depression.'

'If I wasn't so tired, I wouldn't be depressed.'

'But you say you feel suicidal? I mean, that's a key sign of depression.'

'I feel suicidal because I'm so damned tired all the time. There are ontological reasons too ... but if I wasn't tired, I'd have other options. There are things I would like to do. Don't you see?'

'Look, you seem like a healthy young man to me, just having some ... issues. Being tired can be a side effect of the medication. I'll double the dose, that often helps.'

'Huh? Helps what? Frighten people away? How can it make any sense that medication that causes tiredness be increased to combat tiredness?'

'The brain is a complex thing, once the balance is right, you should feel your energy lift.'

'What exactly is imbalanced, you haven't measured anything?'

'You wouldn't be here if it was working properly. We just need to find your sweet zone.'

'Is that a technical term? It sounds like you're just kicking the problem into the long grass. Shouldn't you at least do some tests?'

'I've taken your pulse and your blood pressure, they're fine. Give the pills a try, come back in three weeks if there's no change. I can't see anything else that could be wrong.'

'I don't think you're listening to me. I've been on this medication for ages. It clearly isn't working. Probably because it isn't addressing the actual problem. I mean, my hair has fallen out, for fuck's sake.'

'Please, language like that isn't welcome here. Maybe you need to see a clariTech. Here's the number for a local centre. Give them a call. Take the pills and come back in three weeks

if nothing changes, okay?'

'Aren't you going to do anything else?'

'Your last blood tests were fine. There would be little point repeating them.'

'What about the hair loss? Don't you think there's something going on with my body?'

'It's probably stress.'

'It's an autoimmune condition, the dermaTech told me so.'

'Yes, but it's all related.'

'What exactly do you mean by that? It sounds a bit wishy-washy.'

'There's nothing else I can do. Take the pills, try a clariTech, plenty of people find it very helpful. Now, if you don't mind, I've other patients to see.'

As anticipated, Ariran left feeling humiliated and ignored. Having little choice, he followed the mediTech's instructions. The clariTech service was free. The staff were still training. Not yet qualified. He got an appointment quickly.

The first session was conducted in a small room with a glass-fronted door. A prim, blond lady had been assigned to his case. She was in her mid-thirties and sat opposite Ariran on one of two uncomfortable plastic chairs. Between them was a low table. On it was a box of tissues and a large glass jar. The jar contained money.

'This is for your donation', said the lady, smiling and pointing at the jar.

'Ah, I don't have any money.'

'Well, there's no obligation, of course. If you find it useful, and you can, you know, spare something, we run on donations, you see.'

'I see. The mediTech pointed me your way. I'd thought you were connected with the health service?'

'Not exactly. We started it as a community project because of the lack of availability in the area.'

'I see. Who's running the project?'

'Miriam. You might not know Miriam, she's not here often. Miriam is the chiefTech. It's a community company thing, you know. She has other businesses, and she's doing this for the

good of the community. Maybe you saw her in the local paper a couple of months back? There was a lovely photograph of her with the mayor. Big smiles and that flashy gold chain. Her office furnishing company just landed a very profitable deal with the local council.'

'No, you're right, I don't know Miriam.'

'Well, not to worry. I'm Susan, I've been here one of the longest. Just over six months. I serviToil on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons.'

Ariran nodded. He remembered his days in the psychTalk community. The qualifications and experience his psychTech, Sofie, had. Very different to Susan. He felt a creeping distrust for the woman. She seemed forced. Artificial in her mannerisms.

Compelled to test his intuition, he asked her a question, 'Susan, can you tell me, have you ever considered suicide?'

'No. Anyway, look, this isn't about me, it's about you. Are you considering suicide? Are you *safe?* I mean, can you keep yourself *safe?* We must know you can keep yourself *safe* while you're in treatment.'

'Safe? I just want to know if you've ever been there, to that dark place?'

'No. I enjoy life. I've got a good attitude, you see. You must think positively to attract good things to your life. I've got a great husband and a lovely house. It's all within reach for those who try hard enough.'

'What? Merely by thinking? How does that work?'

'Well, smile and say, today is going to be a good day.'

'Sorry, do you think I'm here because I've got a bad attitude?'

'Well—'

'Do you think there's actually any point to life?'

'Yes, of course, I mean we all have our own way of making life meaningful, don't we? I like to go out with my friends. We have a gin club on a Wednesday. Golf club every weekend. We don't actually play golf, of course. I can't imagine what a mess it would make of my nails. Then, there are holidays with my hubby. We're going away in a couple of weeks. I can't wait. I'll

have to get some sun cream.'

'Susan, do you understand evolution?'

'Well, yes, we're all on a journey, aren't we? Evolving all the time. You can too, if you take the chance to learn. I think you'll find that I can help you grow. Work with me, you could achieve your full potential.'

'No, I mean actual evolution. The random mutation of genes. The survival of those that are incidentally endowed with the capacity to adapt to the aimless environmental conditions they're thrown into. Evolution in the scientific sense. Because that has no purpose. It's an arbitrary, pointless competition of blood and tears without end.'

She began to finger a gold-plated, zirconia cross, hanging from her neck. 'That's so sad. I mean, I think it does have a purpose. I have faith in a creator, and I think life is good.'

'Okay, I hear you. You've bought into a fairy story. You want to think the world is magical. That your life means something. But evolution, actual evolution, it doesn't have any purpose. Putting a spin on it doesn't make it so. In fact, religious or spiritual thinking is part of human evolution. It's simply a way for our complex brains to adapt to our own conscious awareness. To fool us into soldiering on. But life itself has no purpose.'

'Well, we all have opinions, Ariran. It's sad that you think like that.'

'This isn't my opinion, it's scientific fact. Your religious view is an opinion. Besides, what *do* you think is the point of life? I mean life in general, not solely your life.'

'Well, I guess I never really thought about it that much. Why would you if you're happy?'

'Do you have children?'

'Yes. Why? Wait, this isn't about me—'

'It's important for me to know, it helps build trust, and I'm curious. If you've never thought about the meaning of life much, what did you think about when you planned to have children? When you planned to create more life? What would you tell your kids if they asked you?'

Susan looked shocked. Then she spoke in a condescending

tone, 'What a strange question! It's just what you do! You *are* very mixed up, aren't you?'

'I don't think there's anything strange about it at all. To bring a life into the world. To imprison another soul in the flesh. To subject them to the pain, the suffering, the torment, and inevitably their death. You must have thought about why?'

She folded her arms across her chest. 'You missed out all the good stuff', she hissed. 'What about joy? Happiness? Love?'

'My children don't miss those things.'

She sat up with excitement. 'Children? I didn't know you had kids, tell me about them.'

'Well, there are two girls and a boy. They were never born because I chose not to inflict life upon them. All three of them are in complete bliss. They've never suffered illness or disease. They've never been bullied or abused. They don't have to face decades serving a mindless, nihilistic system with no goal other than consumption and expansion. And they will never face the agonies of dying, nor experience the pain and loss caused by the death of the people they cared about.'

Susan shifted in her chair. It creaked. The fake smile dropped. Her thickly painted eyebrows arched aggressively as she spat out her words, 'This is ridiculous. You missed a lot out. Those imaginary kids of yours. They will never have fun. Never spend time with friends. Never marry, or dance, or hear music, or eat chocolate. How cruel to deprive them.'

'Yes. You're right. They will never experience those things, but they will never miss them either. There's nobody there to miss them, so there's no loss. The deprivation you're imagining is in your head, not reality. You're having your own emotional reaction at the thought of being deprived of those things, and imagining some none-existent person feels the same. But they don't. They can't feel anything at all. Besides, all the things you mentioned are part of the program. Your good feelings are part of a behavioural control system shaped by biochemical signalling. We're merely chained bears, poked with hot lances, and forced to dance for scraps. But, unlike

the bears, we dance for nobody, that's the worst part of the whole sick joke. None of it means anything at all. Your life is nothing more than a flux of neurochemically-induced experiential states. Why would I force someone into that? Most importantly, if your belief in The Writings of The Rays is correct, my kids, unlike yours, won't be exposed to the risk of eternal torment. I saved them through self-discipline and the sacrifice of flesh-driven desire.'

Susan gasped. Then excused herself to visit the bathroom.

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35. Tramp

'Sorry about the break, Ariran. When nature calls, sometimes you just have to answer. Now. Where were we? I think you were telling me, in a roundabout kind of way, that your childhood had been unhappy. Was there anything specific that came to mind?'

Susan was shielding herself from Ariran's questions. Reframing them as an individual problem. Avoidance and deflection. Common tactics used by the unconscious mind of the kutKish. Difficult questions could bring difficult truths to awareness. They had to be abjured without serious consideration. He knew there was no point probing more deeply into her views. Nothing more would be uncovered. She was an empty set. Strong boundaries, enclosing a vacuum. The more questions he asked, the more insane she thought he was, and the more insane he thought she was. He decided to resume his role. Play the patient. It would help her feel like she was doing her job.

'Ariran? You've gone quiet. Are you okay?'

'Yeah, sorry, Susan. I was just thinking. There was this time when I was a kid. I just can't forget it ...'

'Did you jizz yet?' asked Callum. He wasn't afraid of anything. Asking embarrassing questions was his forte, it made him feel powerful.

Ariran found him difficult to look at. Long, curled eyelashes. Effeminate, freckled cheeks. A cutesy look. The camouflage of a predator. Danger lurked behind his smirking black eyebrows and unearthly blue eyes. Ariran dredged up the courage to reply. 'I don't want to tell you.'

'Come on, it's a natural part of life. I don't want to bum you or anything', giggled Callum.

'No, I haven't jizzed yet.'

'Don't you wank?'

'Yes, of course.'

'Ha, you wanker.'

'Fuck this.' Ariran turned his back on Callum and tried to walk away.

Callum pulled him back by the shoulder. 'Ah, come on, we all play with it. Well, except me. I get the birds to do it. Them dirty bitches down on the estate. Have you got any pubes yet?'

'Er ... yeah, I've got a few', lied Ariran.

'Ah well, keep jerking kid, it'll come one day. Ha. I hit myself in the eye the first time! I've got a bush down there, it's like a jungle.'

He'd no idea why Callum was telling him this and guessed he was exaggerating; his voice had only just broken, causing him to warble as he spoke. Ariran wished his would break soon too.

The pair caught a bus. Sat on the top deck. A visit to the adolescent restaurant. He hadn't really wanted to go. Mother could only afford to give him one maudaTech a week for pocket money. Only enough to buy a burger or a cola, not both. If it weren't for his skolOpticon bus pass, he wouldn't have been able to go at all. Callum made the trip religiously every Saturday. For him, the adolescent restaurant had become a place of pilgrimage. Such was the power of advertising. Ariran hated the place. But he was lonely. Shy. Skinny. Pale. Having a confident, aggressive friend like Callum felt good. When the kid insisted he join him, he couldn't say no.

The two of them got along well at first, but Callum was getting more out of control and frustrated with Ariran's reserved nature. Ariran didn't get a kick out of spitting at people in the street from the top-deck window. Drawing cocks on the roof with a marker pen wasn't his thing. He didn't like slashing upholstery. And seeing Callum set fire to a newspaper that had been left on a seat horrified him.

Before going to eat, the boys spent an hour wandering around sports shops. Not to buy anything, nor look for

anything in particular. It was just that Callum liked to point out all the tracksuits and training shoes that were cheaper than the ones he was wearing. Expensive training shoes were a status symbol. Ariran didn't care for them much. He liked whatever was comfy. Not that he had a choice. Mother could never afford clobber like Callum's. Tenebray liked to wear boy's tracksuits and trainers, so he mostly wore her hand-me-downs.

Callum's father, who claimed to be a building contractor, was very wealthy. He slept around. Beat his wife. Beat Callum. Ariran had seen the belt marks on Callum's back. The application of 'common-sense' discipline. All behind closed doors. The man was a well-regarded serviToiler; successful in kutKish society. His family had the finest attire to hide their wounds.

In the adolescent restaurant, a spotty girl with braced teeth took their order. She plucked their burgers from the hot chute. Flung them onto a tray.

'You can have pizza face, I'll have the cute one with the tits. That one down there', said Callum in a loud voice.

The girl serving them blushed and lowered her head. Ariran loathed cruelty. Was this nasty bastard really the best he could do for a friend? He picked up the tray and the two boys walked toward an empty table. Callum winked at the girl with the tits. She seethed, then wilted. Once they'd claimed their space, Callum went to the condiment station. He fetched as much as he could carry. Fistfuls of ketchup, barbecue sauce, pepper, salt. More than a dozen individually wrapped, plastic straws. A woman, sitting with her husband nearby, gave Callum a disapproving look as he sat down with his booty.

He clocked her. 'WHAT YOU LOOKING AT?!'

'Cheeky get!' she growled, spitting half-chewed fries across her husband's food.

'Yeah, I am cheeky. I've got two, no four.' Callum stood up. Turned around. Patted his arse with both hands. Sat down again. Smirked at the woman. She looked at her husband. He shrugged and took a bite of his burger. Ariran wondered at what point Callum had realized his power. The playful

rudeness and lack of fear, combined with girly lashes and sociopath's eyes. He cast a spell on people. Got away with the most atrocious behaviour.

Ariran finished chewing the last of his burger. The bun was stale. Scraped down the back of his throat like a dry sponge. Callum had finished too. Now he was slurping the last of his milkshake.

'Why didn't you get a drink, a lemo or something?' Callum asked. He looked genuinely puzzled.

Ariran couldn't reveal that he didn't have the money. 'Not thirsty', he mumbled. A lie. He was so damned thirsty. The sun blazed through the glass front of the restaurant. His leather jacket was sticking to his skin with sweat. He wanted to take it off. But Callum might have seen the label. The rip in the stained lining. He'd guess it was from a charity shop. Ariran would never hear the end of it.

A fresh breeze blew outside. It brought a little relief from the heat. The boys ambled through the busy afternoon crowds, back toward the bus station. A gang of lads was sitting on a bench, smoking, and drawing graffiti. Five in total. Older than Callum and Ariran. Stocky, rough lads. One had a long scar on his cheek. Another, a boxer's nose. Something hit Ariran above the eye as he walked past. It fell to the floor. A match. Another one hit him in the chest. He batted it down before it set fire to his clothes. The lads on the bench were cackling. They reminded Ariran of the lads that had tortured his friend Brian. That other alien species. The cold-blooded lizard-brains. He was sick of bullies. His emotions got the better of him. 'Fucking knob-heads', he growled.

'You fucking what, faggot?' replied one of the lads.

The gang stood up. Walked over to the boys.

'Shite, what have you done?' asked Callum. He sounded scared. So he could feel fear!

Ariran was confused. How was this his doing? That match-throwing cunt nearly made him half blind. But this was no time for arguing. Ariran ran to a nearby department store. Made his way down the escalator. Found himself in the health

and beauty section. There was a long queue, but he felt safe with so many people around. He picked up a cheap bar of soap. Joined the back of the checkout queue. Tried to blend in. The soap would have to be ditched before he reached the front. He had no money.

The blow came out of nowhere. Rough square knuckles hit him hard in the jaw. Several shoppers gasped. He fell into a display stand stacked with stockings. The shoppers did nothing to help. A shop assistant bolted out from behind the counter. She pushed the attacker back before his boot made contact with Ariran's head. Ariran felt the draft as the foot swished by. More help arrived. A manager. A security guard.

'I'll see you around, faggot', said the lad. Then he ran off.

The shop assistant helped Ariran to his feet. Walked him to a chair at the back of the store. Ginger hair pinned in a bun. Slim but muscular. A hardness about her features. Ariran felt a warm glow emanating from her heart.

'Are you okay, love?' she asked Ariran, brushing his white hair away from his forehead.

Ariran tried to speak but coughed out a blood-soaked tooth instead.

'Goodness!' the lady exclaimed. 'Look at what that thug has done. His mother must be proud.'

The thug's mum probably would be proud, Ariran thought. *At best, disinterested.*

The store manager had stayed near the door to make sure the assailant was gone. Now he approached. Offered to call the poliTech. Ariran declined. Asked if he could sit a while before leaving. When he got home, he didn't tell Mother what happened. She'd have blamed him for starting a fight. Beat him over the head to teach him not to be violent.

Ariran next saw Callum at skolOpticon the following Monday.

'Where the fuck did you run off to?' his friend asked, angrily.

'I went into the shop. I thought you were behind me ... what happened?'

'I got the shite kicked out of me, that's what! But they

didn't dare touch my face ... much.' Callum jerked his head, flicking his fringe away from his eyes. There was a small bruise below his left cheek bone. He lifted his shirt. His chest was black and blue. His back too. They'd cornered him against a shopfront. He'd fought back. Or so he said. 'They was laying into me ... they knocked me down and was kicking me. People was stood watching. Nobody did nothing until this old fella came. He stood in front of me. They hit him, but then some other blokes came and chased them off.'

They were lucky. It could have been much worse. Lads who amuse themselves by throwing matches at people's eyes in broad daylight, in a busy shopping centre, they don't stop until they've caused serious harm. Unless someone stops them. Yes. They'd got lucky. But there was real damage to their friendship. Callum didn't trust him any more. From his perspective, Ariran had abandoned him. He'd faced that pack of wild dogs alone.

After that, Callum turned bitter and nasty. Belittled Ariran with sly comments. His skolOpticon blazer was cheap. His shoes were coming away from the soles. He smelt of cabbages. He had no pubes. His voice hadn't broken. He wasn't a man. He was a pauper. A peasant. A coward. A weakling. The abuse was delivered daily.

A couple of weeks passed. Ariran was playing football during break. Running toward goal. Ball at his feet. Callum was on the opposition. He wasn't much of a footballer. Didn't usually bother to break a sweat. But he made a special effort for Ariran. Running full pelt, he swung a scuffed, black brogue hard into Ariran's shin. Ariran fell onto the tarmac. Rolled around with pain. Then he leapt up. Squared off.

'What you gonna do you shit-house, run into a shop?' Callum teased.

Ariran wasn't much of a fighter. He hated hurting people. But he could be vicious when he lost his temper. Punch after punch landed hard on the side of Callum's head. But Callum was accustomed to the knocks and blows delivered by the fat fist of his heavy, middle-aged father. He barely flinched as

Ariran's puny knuckles collided with his skull.

'You pathetic little tramp', sneered Callum. He pulled down hard on one of Ariran's blazer pockets. Tore the seams. 'Look how cheap and flimsy that is. Look at your shoes. Tramp!' Ariran punched him again, but Callum just smirked. 'Tramp! Tramp! Tramp!'

Callum's vocal punches were more effective than Ariran's physical blows. It pushed Ariran over the edge. He saw a rock under the hedgerow at the edge of the playground and ran to get it. It felt good in his hand. He'd do Callum some real damage now. Then he saw the assistant head thothTech approaching. He'd been watching from a distance—Ariran swinging punch after punch, Callum standing there being hit.

'Gosh. There's a lot to unbox there, Ariran. Thanks for being so open, it'll really help our progress. How do you think all that affected you?'

'I guess it reaffirmed my suspicions.'

'About Callum?'

'No. About life. You see, at home, I was always fighting. My sister was a bully. Mother too. Physical violence. Psychological violence. Father was the same but didn't live with us. I saw that life was all about manipulating, claiming power, getting things, controlling others. It's like people saw me as empty. A servant. A potential container for their shit. A mirror for self-approval. If they didn't get those needs met voluntarily, they'd become aggressive, manipulative, and sometimes violent. I can see it's still that way in most cases now.'

'Hmmm. So you weren't much of a fighter?'

'That's not really my point. I mean, if people were a bit more self-conscious, controlled, and civilized, if they really understood that they're fighting because of basic animal drives, in other words, for nothing, none of us would need to fight, would we?'

'Yeah, but didn't you ever go to boxing or anything? It's useful to be able to hold your own.'

'I went to some martial arts classes. And you're wrong, I

could hold my own. I didn't like to fight, but I could be vicious if provoked. Had the thothTech not been present, I would have cracked Callum over the head with that rock. I've always had the will to fight, just not the strength, especially when I was younger. A young kid can't win against an adult. Or against an older sibling. So I tried to avoid fighting. But if pushed, I'd improvise a weapon. It didn't matter if I got hurt or into trouble. So long as I caused them enough damage to make them think twice next time. She got a shock sometimes.'

'Who, your mum?'

'No, Tenebray.'

'Your sister?'

'Yeah. But I knew fighting was no good. I didn't want to be like them. My heart told me there was another dimension to life. Another possibility. Things didn't need to be the way they were.'

'I see. So you tried, but you couldn't stand your ground. You were too weak. And the people who should have helped you hurt you.'

'Well, I think you're missing the nuance, but sort of. Besides, anytime I did fight back, I seemed to get into more trouble.'

'Like with Callum?'

'Yeah. Mother was the worst though. If I ever fought off Tenebray, and I did a few times, she'd grass to Mother. Then I'd get a beating. She didn't bother asking what had happened. There was no justice. And she had these fat, heavy rings on her gnarly fingers. The pain from the blows to my head was quite something.'

'So you could never win. Nobody let you explain yourself. You were crushed from all sides, and there was no justice at all.'

'Exactly.' Ariran was surprised. Susan was clumsy, but not entirely unperceptive.

'How awful. I'd never treat my kids that way. Getting back to this friend who betrayed you, Colin—'

'Callum.'

'Sorry. Callum. I want you to try something.'

'Okay.'

'Pretend I'm Callum, sitting here in front of you. You can say anything you like. Ask anything you want. I won't hit you or bully you in any way.'

'Callum, I fucking hate you. You're a cunt.'

'Okay, I hear you. Maybe we could lose the swearing? Is there anything you'd like to ask me? As Callum, I mean.'

'Why are you a cunt?'

'Please, Ariran, could we just lose the swearing? Maybe you could rephrase the question?'

'Sorry, Susan. I could just see his smarmy, bitchy little face so clearly.'

'Ariran!'

'Oh, yeah, sorry. A question. Why ... why were you so nasty to me? To so many other people.'

'I'm sorry I was nasty to you, Ariran. I was a kid. My father was my role model, and he was a nasty bully. When you left me being beaten in the street, I felt frightened and betrayed. I wanted you to feel what I'd felt. To suffer like I had.'

'But I was assaulted too? I wouldn't have been able to help you.'

'Yes. But friends stick together.'

'You could have run away. You could have come with me. I thought you would.'

'I'm not a runner like you. I stand and fight my battles.'

'Even when you're going to lose? What's the point in that?'

'Dignity.'

'But you tried to destroy other people's dignity at every opportunity.'

'I gave you dignity. I was strong and you liked being around me. It made you feel strong too.'

'I was lonely and desperate, and I didn't like you one bit.'

'Ah. There's the truth. You were a fake. A user. A cling on.'

'Susan, can we stop this? I don't think it's helping.'

'Gosh, yes. I was really getting into that. Almost felt like I knew the boy. Did you hear anything that surprised you?'

'I suppose. I guess Callum might have known I didn't like him that much. He must have wanted a friend too, or he

wouldn't have been hanging round with me. He was probably testing me with all that mischief. Seeing if I was loyal. And I suppose he was a kid too. He had an awful father. But I don't understand why he mimicked him instead of trying to be different from what he hated.'

'Some people copy the things they hate so they can feel closer to them. He probably wanted to love his father, so he acted like him. Many abusers were abused themselves. We only have a few minutes left, Ariran. Is there anything troubling you? Will you be okay later?'

'I'll be okay.'

'Same time next week then?'

'I think I'm busy next week, can I let you know?'

'Of course. Just call the office. They can sort an appointment for you. I do hope you come back, Ariran. Take care.'

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36. Grubs

The conversation with Susan troubled Ariran. He *had* used Callum. Not that he knew. He was only a kid. And the social drive was innate. Relationships were a resource for survival. An aid to consumption. Useful for successful reproduction. So, realizing the depth of deception deployed by the puppet strings of his unconscious wasn't the sole reason for his angst. It was the way it dissolved his identity. He'd always maintained a polarized view of himself. People like Callum were substantively different. They were people whose inner workings he couldn't relate to. Now he realized it wasn't so black and white. They were just trying to survive. All they had to call on was their genes and their experiences. It wasn't entirely their fault if they'd never called into question the reason *why* they were trying to survive. It was in their nature. In their programming. Most of them weren't consciously evil. Some were. But most were evil unconsciously. That's why it was all so banal. Ariran didn't want to be banal, or evil, but it was clear to him that he wasn't as self-aware as he'd thought. He'd also acted on instinct. Albeit with a resentful scepticism, and, perhaps, an additional layer of complexity. Nonetheless, his unconscious was driving him too. His marriage to George wasn't a romantic commitment. It was a survival strategy. And it had been effective.

Ariran wanted to go back and see Susan. To tell her about that time at the railway. About Mother. About all the things. He was curious to discover how she'd react, but also wanted absolution. At the same time, he couldn't bear the thought. Then, he dreamt about it. Him, naked, kneeling on a hard stone floor. Susan, wearing nothing but a high-hitched nun's habit. She listened to his story, tutting and binding his hands with a rope. Next, she pushed his head down and pulled the end of the rope through his legs, tying his wrists to his

ankles. He was stuck, buttocks aloft, forehead pressed against the cold floor. Susan fetched a cane and demanded he say *Hail Miriam* with each stinging strike. After fifty, she untied his wrists from his ankles, and led him by his bound hands to a chair, forcing him to kneel before it. She sat down. Spread her legs wide. Dangled her zirconia cross loosely between her naked thighs. Demanded he kiss it. He obeyed. Kissed her thighs. Worked his way closer. Began to pleasure her with his tongue. As she neared ecstasy, he wriggled his hands free from the rope and wrestled her to the ground. Now it was her turn; he was horny and very angry.

The bed was sticky when he woke. After that, he couldn't go back and see Susan. He'd get hard straight away. Far more humiliating than his dream. Besides, he'd been through it all before. Talking. Reflecting. It didn't change the world, or his dark opinion of it. Susan was part of the brainwashing brigade. The new inquisition. They wanted him to unlearn his experiences. Forget the depth of his awareness. To think and act like them. Reintegrate with society. Enter serviToil. Suffer with a silent smile. Die a living death. It was psychological warfare. Not just that. It was biochemical warfare. Each reward and punishment. Each piece of coercive, manipulative propaganda. They created neurochemical chain reactions. Biochemical responses. Real, measurable substances flowing around the body. You didn't need to be a brain in a vat to be controlled by a malicious glow.

The thought of seeing Susan or the mediTech again made Ariran nauseous, but he did see the dermaTech for a second appointment. By then, his head hair was almost completely gone, and he'd lost another sizeable chunk from an eyebrow. Steroid injections did nothing. He was offered an immunosuppressant. A last resort. It was expensive. Largely ineffective. Potentially dangerous. He was desperate. Gave it a try. Had to stop after a week. Made him so sick, he felt he was going to die. He'd have to live with his hair loss. Like he did with the headaches. Like he did with the back pain. And the ankle pain. And the anxiety. And the depression. And the chronic torment of his itchy skin.

Ariran realized nobody was going to help him. Not the mediTech. Not the clariTech. Not the dermaTech. Not his family. After a little desktop research, he stopped taking antidepressants. Replaced them with herbal supplements and vitamins. Within a week, he felt a little more energized. His mood lifted. This prompted another search for serviToil. He sent off several applications, taking aim at becoming a creative. To his surprise, he secured an interview. It went well. He was taken on full-time. A small company. One IT manager. Three video production technicians. A room full of sales staff. Low pay. No perks. No pension. No sick pay. The legal minimum vacation time. On the upside, the small kitchenette had a kettle and as much cheap, instant coffee as you could stomach.

Paul was responsible for onboarding Ariran. He was a middle-aged man with a stammer and a dry sense of humour. Before joining the company, he'd run a design agency. Just him. Mainly doing adverts for glossy leaflets. He kept getting stiffed on payments. Despite spending over eighty hours a week in serviToil, he couldn't make ends meet. Toward the end, before his business folded, he was owed over fifteen thousand maudaTech. Chasing the money was fruitless. He didn't have the time or resources to resort to legal action. Lack of cash saw Paul evicted from his house. He began sleeping on the floor of his cheap rented office. They soon kicked him out of there too. The chiefTech of the video production company, Grant Cameron, was a former associate. Paul knew the man was a shark, but he was homeless and begged Cameron for serviToil.

'That was a couple of years ago, Ariran ... b-b-but ... it's not so b-b-bad here', Paul said, with a shrug of the shoulders.

'So, you've been here for a couple of years? Only two of you on production?'

'No ... er ... y-y-yes, currently, three w-w-with y-you, b-b-but there w-was another guy b-before you. He left a few m-months ago.'

'Left?'

'Y-y-yeah. He crack-cracked up, couldn't take it any more.

It w-was a shame. He was talented ... b-b-b-but this ... it wasn't for him.'

'Why not?'

'He got fed up ... it's not like ... he felt he was scraping the b-b-barrel ... the p-pay wasn't what he was promised ... he was p-p-promised a p-proper salary when things got going. He joined in the early days, helped get things started ... b-b-but then didn't get the p-pay rise when the money started ro-rolling in.'

'Oh. Don't you have a union?'

'Shhhhhhhh! Can't say that word here! Cameron is easily triggered, and the CCTV cameras have audio. I tr-tr-tried to s-start one and got s-sacked. Ended up homeless again ... w-well ... couch-surfing. Got taken b-back, so long as I p-p-promised never to talk about you know w-what again. You know w-what I m-m-mean? The you onions.'

'But that's illegal, couldn't you have sued?'

'Sure, I could have tried to b-b-b-bring a claim, b-b, it wouldn't have done any good. N-not in the long term. I was terrified at the p-p-prospect of b-being left without serviToil and homeless. You need references. The b-b-boss would've seen to it that I never s-serviToiled in the industry again. I was already on m-mmm-my arse. Hey, w-what's up with your hair?'

'It's an autoimmune disease. Nothing can be done.'

'B-b-bummer. Did you used to wear hats?'

'Yeah, why?'

'I h-hear hats can m-m-make your hair fall out. My old m-m-man. He started w-w-wearing hats w-when he started going b-b-bald. B-b-but it did no good. It j-just got w-w-worse.'

'Oh. I don't think this is the same thing. And hats don't make people go bald.'

Not long into his new career, Ariran's autoimmune disease took the remainder of his hair. No body hair. No facial hair. No eyebrows. No eyelashes. Nothing. He was deep in the uncanny valley. A place where you weren't quite human. Like a

humanoid robot or anthropomorphic alien. To the kutKish, he was a freak show. They pointed, stared, and laughed. Some thought it was a strange sexual fetish. Others, an identity statement. Sometimes they became abusive, as though he'd chosen to be that way. Simple-minded, ignorant idiots were ubiquitous. It was too hard to avoid them. He stopped going out. Friendships faded. His mood darkened.

ServiToil became his focus, but many customers were complaining. They'd been told lies to get them to part with their money. Fear of missing out. Politicians, businesses, religions, and parents targeted that fear daily. If you don't do X, you'll lose Y. KutKish life largely consisted of navigating a relentless flux of propagandized threats based on false or inadequate information.

At first, Ariran tried to ignore the complaints. It wasn't unusual behaviour for a company, and he needed the serviToil. But he also had a conscience. Then he discovered that Grant Cameron started the company with dodgy money. Shady property deals. Elderly people tricked out of savings. Government funds acquired using underhand methods. Suspected money laundering too. Ariran wanted out.

As he was looking for new serviToil, the economy crashed. Rampant malpractice and fraud in financial services. Despite years of industry-led complaints about over-regulation, the government was blamed for inadequate oversight. Some rich investors made a lot of money. Most ordinary people suffered. There was much hand-wringing. Detailed examination of the minutiae of macroeconomics. Morality seemed off-topic.

ServiToil was scarce. Especially in Ariran's area. He had no option but to stay where he was. To appease his conscience, he documented every case where a customer complained about being swindled. His pay was coming from these people. Once he had a substantial portfolio of examples, he approached his line manager. Asked for the issue to be addressed. The line manager was blunt. The chiefTech was fully aware of what was going on. He encouraged it. It brought the money in. Besides, the sales staff, who Grant Cameron

referred to as 'the grubs', were only paid commission. They had to sell to make any money. They had bills. Rent. Loans. Children. A choice between underhand tactics and not getting paid only had one outcome. If they resigned from paying serviToil, they'd be ineligible for citizen's fund payments. Left with nothing. Most were there because they couldn't get serviToil anywhere else in the first place.

Mr Cameron was rarely in the building. He flounced into the office once or twice a week to stir up the energy of the sales staff. Crooked smiles. False promises. Fake tan. A snake in a suit. If his superficial encouragement failed or met with resistance, he resorted to bullying. Ariran found the man detestable. Superficially, he looked like a shining example of a self-made entrepreneur. Carefully manicured nails. Designer suits. Expensive car. Props for his act. But he'd never created anything of real value.

Eventually, Ariran submitted a formal complaint. A hard choice. His average day was less stressful than the call centre or truck driving. Despite persistent fatigue and a chronic headache, it was manageable. But he was part of a machine feeding off gullible people. It played on his mind. He wasn't a naive fool. Customers should be smarter than to fall for cheap tricks. But he saw the bigger picture. The normalization of dog-eat-dog behaviour. Society was being shaped into a chaotic throng of animalistic individuals, beholden to the law of the jungle. Nature was atrociously unjust and cruel. If the kutKish continued on their trajectory, the outcome would be suffering on a catastrophic scale. It wasn't about the immorality of one company. It was about refusing to accept an infestation. A parasite eating society from the inside out. He couldn't exchange his soul for solipsistic pragmatism.

Surprisingly, the manager promised the complaint would be taken seriously. The chiefTech wanted to change company practice. He shouldn't worry about it any more. But nothing changed. Honesty was unfashionable. Ariran continued to seek alternative serviToil, but the firm's reputation preceded it. The few companies that appeared more ethical were uninterested in applicants from ‘low-grade’ businesses. His

heart demanded he quit. His head told him not to risk it. Things were going okay at home. They'd sold-up and settled in a rented house near the countryside. Escaped the urban decay. George and Lucy were happy.

A sustained period of decline preceded their decision to move. It started following a gangland execution. A shooting just around the corner from their house. Shortly after the murder, Ariran stumbled across a local gang member trying to rape a young girl. Due to his interruption, the lad ran off, and the girl escaped. But soon after, their house was targeted for low-scale terrorism. Things were thrown at the windows. Stones, shoes, tin cans, and fireworks. Ariran's car was scratched up. The front door was set alight. He couldn't sleep. Every noise he heard from outside had to be investigated. And there was lots of noise. Passing voices. Slamming doors. Footsteps. Revving engines. Dogs barking. Discarded bottles and cans, blowing in the wind.

After considerable resistance, George eventually agreed to sell the house. Despite owning it for several years, the market had dipped. The sale only just paid off their mortgage debt. They made no profit. But moving was good for both of them. Less traffic pollution. Less noise. A friendlier neighbourhood. Even the tap water tasted better. Ariran loved the place. George settled quickly. There were fields and countryside footpaths. It was a joy to take Lucy for walks. They'd found some peace and quiet at last.

As his energy levels improved, Ariran was able to focus more on plotting his escape from serviToil. Experience working for a dodgy company wasn't enough. He needed a formal qualification. After some searching, he found a reasonably priced law degree. Distance learning. Twenty hours study per week minimum. All year round. For four years. A hell of a commitment considering his health, but he felt determined.

Once he started, he found it took near forty hours per week to keep on top of things. Largely due to how tired he was. After a day at serviToil, his mind was slow. He couldn't retain information. The motivation to make life better drove him on.

Four hours every night. Ten hours per day at the weekend. The rest of his life was put on standby.

Eleven months went by in the blink of an eye. It was time to be assessed. The first exam was in the capital city at nine in the morning. Ariran booked a cheap hotel and travelled down the evening before, arriving late. Room five one four. In the basement. No windows. Air, thick with sweat. Black streaks across the ceiling. Whip marks. To his horror, he found a used condom stuck to the bathroom floor. Countless little flies crawled around the sink. He wanted to complain but was exhausted. The bed looked inviting. He pulled the duvet back, and was about to undress, when he saw something move on the sheet. He looked closer. Numerous black specks. Tiny bodies. Crawling. He caught one in a dirty plastic cup that had been left in the bathroom. Grabbed his coat and case. Headed to reception.

The receptionist was a very young man. Reclined in his chair. Feet up. Ready for a night watching TV. Ariran placed the cup down firmly on the counter. 'Do you see what this is?' he asked.

'A cup?' replied the receptionist, nonchalantly, rocking on the back legs of his chair.

'LOOK INSIDE THE CUP!'

The youth jumped up. 'Oh ... er ... it looks like a fly.'

'This place is filthy. There's a condom on the floor in my bathroom. The room stinks. There are flies and ... AND THERE ARE FUCKING BUGS IN MY BED!'

'Okay, okay, keep your hair on', smirked the receptionist.

'KEEP MY HAIR ON? FUCKING COMEDIAN IS IT?!' Ariran's face flushed crimson. He felt his hands curl into tight fists.

'Well, I mean, calm down please sir. Would you like a different room?'

'ARE YOU TAKING THE PISS? THERE'S NO WAY I'M STAYING HERE. I'LL BE IN TOUCH.' Ariran stormed out. Walked to the end of the block. It was nearly midnight. He took a deep breath. What to do? Where to go? The amber light of a taxi appeared. He stepped into the road and hailed it. A

wave of relief washed over him once he was sat in the back.

'Where to?' asked the driver.

'Er ... could you take me to a reasonably priced hotel somewhere nearby?'

'LOOK BALDY, IF YOU DON'T KNOW WHERE YOU WANT TO GO, YOU CAN GET OUT NOW!'

'Wha ... er, I just thought you'd know somewhere, I'm in a bind, I thought you could help.'

'I'M A DRIVER, NOT A SOCIAL WORKER. GET THE FUCK OUT YOU FUCKING DRUG ADDICT!'

Ariran jumped out and slammed the door. He was shocked. First the hotel, then that. Two insults about his hair loss within ten minutes. What a hostile, unhappy city. He wanted to report the driver, but the cab disappeared before he made a note of its plates. Despite being sorely tired, the idea of hailing another cab made him feel sick. He started to walk.

Just as he was contemplating laying on a bench for the night, Ariran came across a large hotel. It was past one-thirty in the morning, but the lobby was open. The receptionist looked him up and down like he was dogshit. She was a little happier once his credit card payment cleared. The room was expensive. Non-negotiable. He was desperate. There was no alternative. He took a shower to wash off the remnants of the dirty hotel. Crawled into bed. Lay his head on a pillow. A banging noise started. It was coming from within the room. Ariran groaned. Switched on the bedside lamp. On the far side of the room were three rows of old pipes. The source of the banging. An air lock. His shower must have set them off.

He lay back and stared at the ceiling. Ornate plaster coving. Matching ceiling rose. Originally painted white but now yellowing. The rest was papered. An embossed pattern of intertwining fleur-de-lis. Misaligned. Painted over in sickly green gloss. Overall, the room was an aesthetic tragedy. Red and brown curtains. Green and beige carpet. Sky blue and purple, pin-striped bed spread. Boutique. He closed his eyes to block it out. Wished he could close his ears. Ninety minutes later, the pipes stopped banging. In seconds, he fell into a deep sleep.

At seven-thirty, his alarm woke him. Rescued him from a nightmare. He'd been stood holding hands with Doug Havishan. Kuu was riding a horse toward them, holding an axe. He swung it at Doug. Chopped off his head. Ariran bent down and picked the head up. Kuu rode the horse back toward him. Ariran held Doug's head up for the horse. It stopped and began to eat. Then it started nibbling Ariran's head. Kuu cackled hysterically and set off fireworks.

Exhausted and aching all over, he hauled himself out of bed. Necked a strong coffee. Headed to the exam hall. On arrival, he was allocated a desk toward the rear of one of the central rows. He flopped into the chair and waited. A girl nearby flashed a nervous smile his way. Her hands were trembling. Suddenly, she stood up. Walked a full circle around her desk. Stood behind her chair. Started doing squats. Ariran smiled. She stopped doing squats. Stood on one leg. Curled the other up, so the sole of her foot rested against her knee. Started taking deep breaths. Hummed 'iiiaaoouummm'. Ariran chuckled. She closed her eyes. Toppled off balance. Picked herself up and began wheeling her arms around in great windmills. Finally, she sighed. Stretched her arms out to the front. Sat down. Cracked her knuckles. Ariran laughed. He forgot his nightmare and all his woes from the previous day.

The exam started. The girl spent the first twenty minutes turning her papers over loudly. Lifting her pen. Scratching her head. Blowing air out of her mouth with a whistle. Eventually, she stopped fidgeting and sat motionless. Stared at the ceiling. Then she walked out. Ariran scribbled away throughout. The exam ended. Despite struggling to answer some questions, he felt reasonably happy.

Outside, he found a sandwich shop, bought an overpriced salad roll, and sat on a nearby bench to eat it. He felt buoyant. Forgot that he was in the capital of misery. Made the mistake of smiling and saying hello to a couple of men who were passing. One of them stopped. Stared at Ariran for a few seconds. Then shouted, 'FUCK OFF YOU WEIRD FREAK! I'M GOING TO FUCK YOU UP WHITE BOY. YOU FUCKING ALIEN!'

The guy lurched toward him, but his friend held him back. Dragged him away. Ariran looked down. Finished eating his roll. He should have known better. Growing up on rough urban streets had taught him city etiquette. Don't make eye contact with strangers. Never speak to them. Don't look like you're avoiding them either. Look casual, but busy. Walk fast. But not aggressively. Never look lost. His short experience of friendly village life had softened him. Made him forget the code. Now he'd had a stark reminder. He wondered if the guy might have reacted differently if he still had his eyebrows and goatee. Not that it mattered. But maybe he would have simply ignored him rather than try to attack him. He promised himself not to try being friendly to strangers again.

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37. Rage

'I'LL GET IT!' Ariran shouted, hurrying to the front door.

It was the letting agent, Mr Smith. 'Can I come in? I'm afraid I've got bad news.'

Ariran showed him into the lounge. George joined them from the kitchen.

Mr Smith took a deep breath. 'Folks, best sit yourselves down for this one.' He remained standing. There was a thin brown envelope in his hand. 'Thing is folks, I've got bad news. The landlady. Well, she's split up with her fella, and ... you know ... they lived not far from here and ... well, she's got the kids in a local skolOpticon, and she wants to live nearby. Sooo ... this is an eviction notice. She intends to move in here. It means you've got two months to find somewhere else to live. Sorry about that.'

'What? We're being evicted? What for?' Ariran demanded.

'Well, it's not about you, fella. She wants the house so she can live in it herself.'

'Not about us? Are you fucking joking?'

'I'm afraid not. Here's the paperwork. If we can help you find somewhere else, let me know. I'll see myself out. Good luck.'

George burst into tears. 'It's not fair', she whimpered. 'Why is it always us? Why?'

Ariran was dying inside. What could he do? They'd done nothing wrong. Far from it. They'd kept the place immaculate. He hoovered meticulously three times a week. Every dog hair. Every crumb. The kitchen was sparkling. On top of that, he'd tidied the garden. Washed the windows inside and out. Even scrubbed the patio. Both of them had settled into the community. Ariran was a regular at the village music club. George was in the women's group. They both enjoyed the fresh air, and countryside walks with Lucy. All three of them

were thriving in the peace and quiet. What a kick in the guts! Seeing George sobbing tortured Ariran. Helpless to do anything, he began to cry too. He remembered a book about a future dystopia. A place where a boot stomped on a human face forever. It was a lie. Propaganda to make them think they weren't already there. The kutKish had always been stomped on. Booted from above. Trampled by each other. Nothing had changed. Nothing ever would.

Two months wasn't long. They had to find somewhere else to live urgently. After selling their house, and moving to a new part of the world just months earlier, neither of them had expected such stress so soon. Ariran went to the spare room to use the computer. He only found one house in a five-mile radius that came within budget, and allowed them to keep a dog. A small place but liveable. He'd have to organize a viewing. Pack everything into boxes again. Hire another truck. Overwhelmed with the absurdity, he wiped a tear from his eye and started giggling. George peeked her head round the door. 'What's so funny? Have you gone mad ... again?'

'Oh, George. It's everything. All of it. The whole damned circus! A clown show. We're prize clowns. I'm so tired of struggling. Trying in vain. These things keep coming. Knocking us down. Do you think it's karma? It's so ridiculous. I must be cursed. You should leave me. I'm bad luck. Maybe I was an evil prison guard in a previous life or a witch burner?'

'Maybe.'

'Hey! You're not supposed to agree! Look, this house is available. What do you think?'

'Where is it?'

'A couple of miles away. It's smaller but more rural. There's nothing else. I've looked everywhere, and we need to be gone in two months.'

'I suppose we could have a look.'

'Beats suicide.'

'You're joking right?'

'Well, it's an option, I mean we could take some pills, leave the gas on, go out with a bang?'

'And what about Lucy?'

'She gets some pills too.'

'What pills? Have you got pills?'

'No. I'm joking. I'll contact the estate agent and try to sort a viewing for the weekend.'

Unusually, the house looked larger than it had in the photographs. The landlord seemed easy going. The renting class were normally subject to an endless list of petty rules. Confirmation they were a subhuman category of people, deprived of the freedom that property owners enjoyed. No smoking. No incense. No candles. No pets. No unemployed people. No self-employed people. No drying washing indoors. No hanging washing outside. No sick people. No car maintenance. No car washing. Only clean, well-maintained cars permitted to be parked outside. Whatever the lord said was law.

The rickety state of the place was probably why the landlord was more relaxed. The front door was old. Gaps in the frame. One of its wooden panels was cracked. Inside, there was a strange smell. Damp. Musty. Gassy. Decorators had given the interior a lick of paint, but the walls were already showing dark patches. Upstairs was no better. The floor was on an angle. One end of the bedroom was two inches lower than the other. There was a gap under the window frame. But the rent was affordable, and it was the only option if they wanted to keep Lucy.

The landlord was delighted they chose the place. However, he'd signed a contract with the letting agent. The tenancy had to be arranged through them. Ariran called them. There was a four hundred maudaTech application fee. Each. Non-refundable, even if rejected. He wanted to tell them where to stick it, but they were only weeks away from being homeless. The eight hundred went on his credit card. More debt. All the requisite documents were sent to the agent later the same day.

Ten days passed. He heard nothing. George chased the agents. They'd 'forgotten' to process the application. Would do so right away. A couple of days later, George and Ariran were each sent a link to a website. It was for credit scoring.

They had to fill in their own forms and pay another fifty maudaTech each. It wasn't clear what serviToil the agents were doing for their fees.

The following week, their application was approved. Then, the day after signing the new rental contract, Ariran received a call from Mr Smith—the letting agent for the place they were moving from.

'Hello, how are you?' asked Mr Smith merrily.

'Er ... okay. What can I help you with, Mr Smith?'

'Well, look fella, I've got good news. Your landlady has changed her mind. She's found somewhere else to live and is happy to let you stay in the house after all.'

'You what?'

'Yeah, you can stay put fella ... if you want like.'

'You've got to be kidding me? We've paid a deposit and a month's rent on another house, plus nearly a thousand in application fees. I've arranged for the utilities to be changed. I've organized a removal van. Now you're telling me this with two weeks to go?'

'Oh ... sorry fella ... er ... what are you going to do?'

'You can stick it up your arse! What right have these people got to muck around with our lives? Does that pompous bitch understand we are actually real people with real lives and real feelings?'

'Yeah. I see, fella. Well, it's not for me to question it. You know. Just doing me serviToil and that.'

Ariran hung up. Something wasn't right. Changed her mind? When he got home, he checked the notice they'd been served with. He found the legislation online. It said a landlord could only evict a tenant without cause if they'd previously occupied the property. The previous occupant had died. The landlord bought the place with the express intention of renovation and rental. Neither he nor his wife had ever lived in it. The eviction notice was illegal. He felt sick. He should have checked sooner. The upset had distracted him. Plus, it was served through a letting agent. Surely it was their responsibility to know what they were doing? He was so enraged, he almost smashed the place up. To expel the energy,

he went running. Sprinted off into the dark. Still wearing his serviToil clothes. It was pouring with rain. Anger drove him to ignore the pain in his ankles. The spasms in his spine. At that moment, he could have killed an elephant with his bare hands. Eight miles later, his body stopped him. After twenty minutes on his knees, sobbing into a puddle, he limped home.

The next morning, he was in severe pain. Everything ached. His ankles were so stiff and sore, he could barely walk to the bathroom without yelling. There were shooting pains radiating from his back. He contemplated calling in sick but couldn't afford to lose the pay. After dressing, he limped gingerly to the car and set off.

Not long into the journey, a car started tailgating him. The guy was honking his horn. Flashing his lights. It was a single-track road. Ariran was travelling at the speed limit. There wasn't anywhere he could pull over to let him pass. A few minutes later, they reached the motorway. The other driver overtook. Gave Ariran the finger. It was the last straw. Ariran flew into a blind rage. He put his foot down and gave chase.

The two of them swerved, honked, and screamed for minutes. Eventually, the other driver pulled onto the hard shoulder. Ariran skidded to a stop behind. His bodily aches dissolved in adrenalin. He jumped out of his car. The other driver got out too. Tall. Athletic looking. Started waving his arms around. Mouthing off. Ariran knew he had to strike first. He marched up to the guy. Headbutted him in the face. Cracked his nose. Blood spurted out and dripped all over his mouth and chin. He wobbled, stunned. Ariran took the opportunity to rain punches, landing several right hooks. Smashed an eye socket. A couple of uppercuts followed. Left then right. The guy's teeth cracked together. He spat a small piece of tongue onto the ground. Blood gushed from his mouth. The next punch burst the guy's bottom lip. Then, Ariran paused for a second. Just long enough for his rational mind to kick in. He looked around. Broad daylight. Rush hour. Trucks and cars streaming past at high speed. If either of them fell into the traffic, it would be curtains for sure. He could end up on a murder charge or dead. The guy was bent

over, holding his face. He looked up nervously.

'You were right up my arse you prick, what the fuck did you think you were doing?' Ariran asked angrily.

'No, no, you started it, you were up my arse. I was just getting you back.'

'Getting me back? What are you talking about?'

'You were tailgating me. You know it. You must have recognized my car. The private number plate.'

'I couldn't give a fuck who you are and no, I don't recognize your car, or your stupid number plate. What's it supposed to say anyway, apart from declaring that you're a dickhead?'

'It's my initials.'

'What? In case you forget who you are? Look, this is fucking ridiculous. Wait a minute, I know you, you were in youth club with my sister. It's you!'

'No, I-I don't think so.'

'Look, just get out of my way. I'm leaving.'

'Do you promise not to hit me again?' the guy pleaded.

'Seriously? Sure, I promise not to hit you, so long as you get out of the fucking way and I don't see you again.' Ariran passed the guy carefully, ready to respond to any incoming blows. There were none. The guy stood limp. Bleeding. One of his eyes had swollen shut.

'My face, w-what have you d-done to my face?' he whined, running his fingers over the blood-soaked lumps on his forehead.

'You were trying to kill me', replied Ariran. 'I lost it. This isn't me. It's not me at all. I'm not like that. I'm not like you. I'm going. You should too. We could both get into serious trouble for this.' He walked quickly back to his car. Pulled away. Left the guy to mop the blood off his face with a paper hanky. When he reached cruising speed, he heard sirens in the distance.

38. Bridge

Ariran was agitated when he arrived at the office. After parking, he checked his face in the vanity mirror. Nothing. No bruises. No marks. The guy hadn't thrown a single punch. Ariran looked at his hands. His knuckles were swollen. He'd lost the skin off a couple. There were splats of blood on his sleeve. Barely noticeable. If anyone asked, he'd tell them he'd slipped and scraped his hand on a wall. Inside, he headed straight to the bathroom to clean up. Then he made a coffee and went to his desk. There was an envelope on his keyboard.

The letter had been copied from a small business website. It listed generic reasons for giving notice of redundancy. Challenging market conditions. Cost-cutting. The need to restructure. It was true that the company couldn't compete on price. People were beginning to make use of the growing number of free, or cheap, off-the-peg services run by global corporations. Plus, Grant Cameron's long-standing encouragement of unethical sales tactics had led to a plethora of poor reviews. To combat this, he hired a PR rep. Review sites and their users were tackled aggressively and threatened with legal action. Most customers didn't have the wherewithal to take up the fight and removed their reviews. The few who attempted to obtain company telephone recordings, to prove their complaints, were obstructed by management. Without proof, their reviews were struck off too. In addition, the company paid for several thousand fake, positive reviews, to further skew public perception. Average star-ratings rose from one out of five, to four out of five. However, it was too little too late. Turnover dropped by so much that the chiefTech confessed he'd been forced to alter his holiday plans. His stay in a luxury hotel, costing ten thousand maudaTech per night, was swapped for standard five-star accommodation.

The sword of redundancy dangled over Ariran's head once more. He and his colleagues would have to wait three months before discovering their fate. He took the initiative. Emailed management. Expressed a desire to leave. A month later, he was called into a meeting with the chiefTech. In all his years of service, it was their first one-on-one conversation.

'We were surprised by your request, Ariran', Mr Cameron said, furrowing his eyebrows. 'You want to leave?'

'Yes, I think it might be time for a fresh start. You want to cut the numbers. I wish to go. It's win-win, isn't it?'

'We had high hopes for you, sonny. You weren't someone we were considering laying off. You could take a supervisor role. Lead the customer service department and head up video production.'

'What? You want me to manage all that? I've barely time as it is, it seems ... unrealistic, and what about the other managers, what will they be doing?'

'Well, some of them won't be here. You'd get a significant pay rise, maybe ten percent or more. I'm sure you'd be able to cope.' The chiefTech grinned broadly and winked.

'I'd have to think about it. But why did you issue me with a notice of redundancy if you had no intention of laying me off?'

'To shake things up. Give everyone a kick up the backside. Especially the grubs, I mean the sales team. They get stagnant, you know. You. You're central to our future. You're not going anywhere.'

'Okay ... well ... yeah ... I'll let you know.' Ariran got up and headed to the door.

'Sure. It's Friday. Have a think about it over the weekend. Perhaps we could talk on Monday?'

'Right, okay.'

Ariran could barely imagine the stress he was being lined up for. Ten percent. What a joke. Two or three people's tasks for ten percent! Not that any amount of money would make a difference. He'd need seventy-hour days. He flopped into his chair. Sat staring at his computer. Numb. Couldn't concentrate. Once more, his whole life began to flash before his eyes. Every moment of suffering from his childhood

injuries right through to the fight at the roadside. What had he battled through it all for? To become captive in serviToil for a psychopathic conman? To live in a wobbly, smelly house with bad damp? To endure chronic physical and mental pain, committed to an unfulfilling marriage with a woman who didn't love him? To suffer the dehumanizing and emasculating loss of his beard and eyebrows? He wondered if he was really one of them. A human. A kutKish. It didn't feel like it. It felt like he was something else. Trapped in his mannequin body. Held prisoner on the dumbest of alien planets.

On the drive home, he thought about what to say to George. The chiefTech's offer was worse than redundancy. He'd seen several other managers systematically ruined by the man. Cameron played it smooth to start with. Fluffing up the ego. Heaping on praise. Dangling a little cash carrot. Fattening them for slaughter. Then came endless impossible demands. Constant criticism and debasing remarks. Public displays of failure. Negative appraisals of personal appearance. He made people feel worthless. Broke them for sport.

Ariran's commute took him over a motorway bridge. While crossing, the car slowed down and stopped. His hand opened the door. His body climbed out. His legs felt cold as they pressed against the steel mesh fence. A constant stream of traffic passed below. A well-timed jump and it was all done with. He thought about George. He'd never attempted suicide since he'd been with her. She was his reason for struggling on. Sure, the relationship was hardly passionate. She kissed like a dead fish. She didn't understand him. But she was a good soul. He couldn't abandon her. Not like this. He stopped his body from clambering over the fence. Took back control. Gripping the metal fence tightly, he let out a harsh, guttural scream. The numbness subsided. He got back into the car. Drove to the shop. Bought a six-pack.

Over the weekend, he unravelled. Drinking. Watching movies. Rambling to George about life and serviToil. She couldn't believe it was happening again and allowed him to let off steam.

The following Monday, he was no better. There was no way he was going to subject himself to the psychological games of the chiefTech. The 'psychic v-v-vampire' as Paul called him. His wealth reflected how much of the life essence of others he'd consumed. The innocent. People with a conscience. Folk who were trying to get by and navigate the experience of life with as little trial and tribulation as possible. The kind tribe. Sensitive types with empathy. Cameron was a demon feeding on them. That was nature's way. Ariran saw it more clearly than ever. Nature was the name given to a process of change via consumption—some thing, feeding off some other thing. Physically, psychically, electrically, energetically. He realized that life was death. They were inseparable. All existence was a cycle of destruction and suffering. All creation, the process of bringing about new forms from the destruction of existing forms, solely to sacrifice those new forms to the same process of destruction that birthed them. Perpetual maleficent autophagy. To genuinely love life. To truly love nature. That meant glorifying suffering. Deifying cruelty. Worshipping at the feet of misery, torture, and death.

Death was preferable to being psychic-vampire food. To buy some time, he called in sick. Drank all week. It didn't stop the cycle of his thinking. There were only two possibilities. Either he accept the popular, existential madness—living in absurdity, and embracing endless cycles of meaningless suffering, or he could end his life and escape. Most kutKish seemed happy to accept the former, willingly partaking in a macabre dance of marionettes, each vying for the next thing to consume. But Ariran just couldn't align with it. He'd lost his appetite. Poor George. In time, she'd be better off without him.

After seven days absence, he had to make a decision. He weighed up his options: return to the office, visit a mediTech, or kill himself. For most of the day, he rocked back and forth in a corner of the bedroom. A good suicide plan seemed preferable, but he was too emotionally disturbed to focus. When George arrived home from serviToil, he was still rocking, and banging the back of his head against the wall.

'Ariran, what's wrong? What are you doing?'

'I'm done.'

'Done?'

'Done with it all.'

'What about your law degree?'

'George, I can't go back to that office. If I quit serviToil, I'll have no money to pay the bills, let alone the course fees. That's even if I had the will to finish it. It's another three years. I'm burnt out after one. And if I did finish it, what then? More soul-crushing serviToil with a different flavour? I don't want to play this game any more. I'm tired of it all. I'm done, I want out.'

George looked angry. She opened her eyes wide and sputtered, 'You need to see the mediTech!'

'Again, George? What will they do? More antidepressants? I can't take any more of this world. I've tried, I really have. I just can't go on.'

'You must! Go and see the mediTech. For me. For Lucy. It's a different one now, anyway. We moved, remember?'

Ariran looked at little Lucy. She was lying belly-down near the bedroom door. Her tail wagged nervously. Her beautiful, big, brown eyes shifted from Ariran to George as they spoke.

'Okay, okay, I'll go and see a mediTech.'

'Promise you will, and you won't hurt yourself.'

'I-I promise.' Ariran's heart sank. He knew he'd be true to his word. Lucy ran over and licked his face.

To his surprise, the mediTech didn't prescribe anti-depressants and send him away with a sick note. Instead, he was referred to the local psych functionality team, and sent away with a sick note. An appointment with a psychTech was arranged quickly, to further assess the need for medication. Soon, he was sat in a consulting room with a young, and incredibly beautiful, mekaZien lady. Low-cut, white blouse. Black velvet suit jacket. Matching skirt. Short, black stockings. Knee-high, black, leather boots. As she spoke, Ariran examined her for more detail. Chunky, gold chain around her neck. Well-fitting, thick, gold rings. One with a massive diamond. Heavy gold earrings. They swung gently as

she spoke. Shoes that matched her handbag. Some high-end designer label. He could smell expensive perfume. Liberally applied. It made his nose twitch. Brought on a sneeze. Ariran was repulsed. A psychTech who was so materialistic was unlikely to be capable of understanding anything about the nature of his problem.

The meeting was brief and superficial. It reinforced his initial impression of the woman. She'd focused on bare facts. Ariran was suicidal. Couldn't face serviToil. Found his marriage unfulfilling. He'd taken to drinking to cope. Several boxes ticked. No time for discussions about meaning, existential philosophy, psychic vampires, hair loss, or critiques of the dehumanizing, mahiThist hegemony. None of that correlated easily with standard diagnostic measures. She would arrange for regular home visits from a local team of supportTechs. No medication for the moment. He was stunned when she concluded the meeting by suggesting that he cut down on his drinking and 'try to relax'.

The home visits were awkward and surreal. A total stranger entered his house every day for an hour. They sat on his couch and encouraged him to talk, prodding and poking into his innermost thoughts and feelings. Ariran explained that he felt bad. Life was unfair and meaningless. Suicide was the only way off the hamster wheel. The supportTechs would listen and nod, furtively glancing at their watches. After a week, he'd seen seven different people. They ranged from mildly empathetic to utterly dismissive. Talking to them was alienating. It was clear that most were only in it for the paycheck. They didn't know him. They had no reason to care about him. Only one lady seemed to actually understand his perspective. She looked depressed too.

Soon, he began to talk about other things. Things that seemed more on their level. The weather. Music. Football. Walking Lucy. He had to play normal if he wanted them gone. The shift in focus created space. To his surprise, he began to feel okay about being not okay, even though he knew that not being okay was not okay, and never could be okay, because the idea of it being okay to be not okay was completely

nonsensical and, actually, quite maddening. For any word to maintain the illusion of meaning, it couldn't be defined as the equivalent of its negation. But then, words didn't make sense anyway. He'd always known that. No wonder he was never able to make himself understood. He was too complex. His thoughts exposed the deficiencies in language. The paradox in logic. The absurd nature of existence itself. None of the drones could allow that sort of malware into their consciousness, it would damage their programming. Except for the odd psychTech, like Sofie. She was smart. She seemed to get it. But there was no funding for that sort of quality any more.

Ariran only had himself to turn to. Yet, the more he doubted language, the more he doubted himself. Weren't his thoughts in language? And if language didn't make sense, how could he be certain his thoughts did? Was he just so deluded by the complexity of his own nonsense that he couldn't recognize it for what it was? As a result, and entirely unintentionally, the daily visits from the supportTechs caused a crack in the darkness. In that space, thoughts began to bubble up. Thoughts about the future. Little dreams.

Preferring to keep his latest breakthrough from the supportTechs, he stuck with low-quality conversation. Simple stuff. Food. Sport. Hobbies. Cars. He could speak about those things with most people. Sometimes, even feign enthusiasm. Words bored him. Miming or gesticulating would have been as effective. Or barking, like Lucy. He usually understood what she was saying. Food. Walk. Hello. Postman. Toilet. Play. Don't go. Come back. Stop singing. He didn't devalue Lucy because of her basic lexicon, so why other humans?

For a moment, he thought about trying to communicate with his next visitor by barking and licking their face. Maybe he'd run round on all fours too. The idea made him chuckle, but he knew such ontological satire would be lost on them.

Due to the length of his absence, Ariran's employer started to harass him. They were being supplied with sick notes but demanded to know when he'd return. The supportTechs

encouraged him to tell them as it was. Uncertain. He was unwell. Needed time. But uncertainty was not acceptable. The company personnel manager called. Threatened to commence severance procedures. If he'd been a member of a union, he could have got some advice. But vulnerability without advocacy left him open to the law of the jungle. All he knew was that everything looked like shit. Suicide was preferable to returning to serviToil. Money was tight. If he found some other type of serviToil, it would probably leave him feeling suicidal again. It always had. There was guilt too. Amidst all the chaos, George was still grafting. Not that she seemed to mind. She'd taken to working late most days. In a desperate effort to resolve his predicament, Ariran made the company an offer. Pay him the equivalent of one month's wages, and he'd quit. They agreed, on condition he sign a non-disclosure agreement, barring him from revealing any of their underhand practices.

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39. Taps

The pressure was on. George's income didn't cover all the bills. Ariran's money wouldn't last long. He spent a couple of weeks trying to relax, just as the psychTech suggested. But it was impossible with such massive worry hanging over him. Regardless of the headaches, joint pain, fatigue, depression, and anxiety, he had to act. He drew up a plan. Had business cards printed. Joined a local enterprise group. Opened a corporate bank account. Attended a flurry of conferences and networking events. He was busy because that's what he was supposed to be. That's what busy-ness was.

Soon, he had several clients and numerous leads. One of his prospects wanted to finalize a contract in person. They arranged to meet at a local cafe. Feeling confident, Ariran approached the man. 'Hi, Casper?'

'Yes.'

'I'm Ariran, nice to meet you. How are you?'

'Well, thanks. Let's cut to the chase. We've discussed things over the phone, but what I'm interested in is your USP.'

'USP?'

'Unique selling point.'

'Unique selling point?'

'Are you going to echo everything I say?'

'No, I'm just a little surprised. I mean, we've spoken about your needs and everything seemed agreeable. I thought you wanted a bit more detail about the formats available, and their compatibility with digital streaming services?'

'Yes, that too. But if I'm asked in a board meeting, I need to tell them what your USP is.'

Ariran was silent. A shrill, distant voice seemed to emanate from his small intestine, 'Say something! Say anything!' He knew what a USP was, he just didn't buy into the cultural programming that the question represented. It wasn't like the

guy was looking for some specific feature. It wasn't a need or requirement of doing business. He was just regurgitating a meaningless business cliche. Ariran scanned Casper's face. He had an intense expression. Inquisitive. Interested. Slightly aggressive. But his eyes were lifeless. Distant. Dead. He looked like a real person, but there was no soul. Casper became uncomfortable. Silence unsettled him. An unexpected lack of data input. He was unable to parse the experience. His anxiety became embodied. A twitch in the arm. Rapid bouncing of his left heel. An increase in blood pressure, betrayed by a rouging of the cheeks.

'Ariran? Hello? You must answer me. Why would I pay you for your services and not use someone else?'

'Yes, I know what you mean. We've discussed your requirements, right?'

'Yes.'

'And you're happy with the price?'

'Yes, it seems reasonable.'

'So, what unique feature is it that you're looking for, Casper?'

'Well, er, nothing specific, you know, what's your USP? What is unique about you? I ask everyone we serviToil with.'

'Unique? I see. I could wear a clown hat and juggle. How about that? Or maybe paint my face blue?'

'What? You look weird enough as it is, pal.'

'Yes, well, thanks for that, it's a medical condition.'

'Ah, are you sick?'

'No. I mean, it's nothing contagious. It's an autoimmune disease. But back to business. I don't know what you want to hear. I produce videos. I do it well. You find the price agreeable. What unique feature do you need to add?'

'Come on, you can't be so naive. You need to tell me what value you are going to bring. You, as a person or a company or whatever. My patience is wearing thin.'

'Your patience? The value I bring is producing a video for you to spec, on time, and on budget. Simple.' Ariran replied, wearily. 'But now I understand you also want to play a game. Some facile display of peacock feathers for a mutual ego-

grooming session. Superficial nonsense. So you feel like you're doing something more important than you really are, which is nothing.'

'Are you some kind of deluded bread-sharer?'

'What? Look, what exactly are you asking? And do try to think about it before you open your mouth.'

'You don't seem to understand business—'

'No, I understand it only too well. It's the practice of grooming and training senescent, rabid beasts, to hunt and extinguish every last ray of light emanating from any human soul, in order to bring about a world of complete and inescapable darkness.'

'I'm not sure we're on the same page here, Ariran. I don't know really ... are you okay?'

'On the same page? A fabulously predictable trope. No, Casper, you're quite right. In fact, we aren't even in the same book or in the same library. Have you ever visited one of those? Fascinating places if you can find one. Enjoy your coffee, goodbye.' Ariran walked out of the meeting. His fragile construction of self-image as businessperson had been demolished by Casper's hollow posturing. On his way home, the dark reality of existential anomie engulfed him. He stopped off and bought a bottle of whisky.

A week passed. A line of seven empty whisky bottles. All but the first had been delivered to the door in anonymous brown boxes. He hadn't left the house or drawn the curtains. George now went to serviToil early, in addition to staying late. She opened the curtains when she arrived home, just for those few moments of light that remained. Ariran closed them again. She knew he was back in the dark zone. A place she didn't understand. Figuring there was nothing she could do, she did nothing. He wasn't sure if she'd failed to notice or had simply given up. But he was relieved. Another conversation about needing to visit the mediTech might push him over the edge.

George stuck to talking about her day at serviToil. Especially some guy called Jack. Her eyes lit up every time she said his name. Ariran didn't care. He continued to drink his

thoughts away, hoping at some point he'd realize what to do next. But neither the merriment of the afternoon, nor the drunkenness of the evening, brought any answers. Still, in the small hours, when he finally crawled into the sagging bed in the spare room, there were no longer any questions. At that moment, he had no regrets. No mind-theatre, playing out an infinite number of potential pasts or futures. Just a soft pillow, darkness, and dreamless sleep. He began to understand Father but forgiveness remained out of reach. The idiot should have known better than to cast another soul into the same misery.

Ariran knew his drinking couldn't last. He couldn't afford it. This time, he went to the mediTech of his own accord.

'Suicide pills?' asked the mediTech.

'Yes, yes, that's right. They had them in the war.'

'The war? What war?'

'Well, all the wars, I guess. You see, I can't play this game any more, or maybe, if it helps, let's think about it as a kind of war rather than a game because the stakes are real, aren't they? Whatever reality is, I wouldn't know, but, let's say, real in our experience at least. So, consequences, if I refuse to be drafted, you know, like a conscientious objector or ... well ... I guess I've already been drafted. Dropped into the trenches by a malignant, sharp-beaked stork, if you catch my drift. And I can't get out, but I don't want to contribute to the war because it's just a pointless act of destruction bringing suffering and death. But I have to take part because if I insist on deserting, I'll be shot, or rounded up and re-educated. So ... sorry this analogy isn't quite ... er, say, when the spies didn't want to be captured and tortured, when they didn't want to give up their innermost secrets, their sacred essence, they had suicide pills didn't they?'

'Do you believe you're a spy or something? That somebody is trying to capture you ... to torture you ... for secrets?'

Ariran sat forward and clasped his hands together. 'Not somebody, more like everybody. Or the force that moves through them. I mean, nobody specific. It's the business you see. You know. The busy-ness. It's not my bag. I don't see life

the way all you people do. It's like I've been captured. Like I don't belong here. Perhaps I'm from another world without all these ludicrous games and superficial bullshit. A world without a fetish for material possessions and banal primate behaviour. A simple place that values compassion, not competition. I mean, there's no such thing as compassionate competition, is there? Competition is a form of violence, like sex. Mind, I enjoy sex, or I did, I would if it wasn't with … I digress. It's life and all the suffering. It's structural. In-built to the process of life itself. Inescapable. I have to go. I need to get back there, to where I belong. Death is the portal. You know, maybe I *am* a spy from another world. That would make sense. I think you're on to something.'

The mediTech shone a bright light into Ariran's eyes. He felt his pulse and took his blood pressure. Everything seemed normal. 'Do you use drugs? Have you taken any drugs recently, legal or otherwise?'

'No.'

'Drink?'

'Oh I'd love a coffee, I feel quite foggy-headed. I didn't have time this morning, what with all this—'

'No. I'm not offering you a drink. This is a mediTech office not a cafe, I'm asking you, have you been drinking alcohol?'

'Yes, mostly.'

'And you want pills to make you die?'

Ariran smiled, 'Yes please.'

The mediTech stood up and began pacing up and down. 'You don't want to be alive?'

'No, I don't. I'm glad I've managed to communicate that much at least.'

'But life is so good. You can have a happy future, but I guess you can't see that right now?'

'No, I can't, and I certainly disagree that life is good! And the future, hah! Are you a fortune-teller? Do you know how many times I've believed that crap? That the future will be better?'

'Okay. Wait there. Don't touch anything. I'll be back in a second.'

The mediTech returned with a trainee to escort Ariran to another room. It was half-filled with broken furniture. The trainee rummaged around and found two usable chairs. They sat for an hour in silence. Ariran was unsure what was happening, but he enjoyed sitting down, and there was a nice view of some bushes through the window. His chaperone became increasingly anxious. Ariran's 'crisis' was causing a delay in seeing other patients. A taxi arrived. Ariran was marched out and eased into the rear seat. The door slammed shut. The trainee mediTech whispered something to the driver. The child locks went on.

Twenty minutes later, the taxi pulled up outside a psych hospiTech. It looked frightening. A series of locked doors. A small exercise area surrounded by a twenty-foot-high wire fence. The driver left Ariran in the back seat and walked over to the front door. Ariran considered climbing into the front seat and escaping through the driver's door. That was unlocked. If he got out, he could run to the main road. Maybe a bus or truck would be coming. The thoughts played through his mind. His body remained motionless.

The taxi driver tried to open the door to reception. Locked. He pressed the buzzer. Then paced. Then pressed it again. Then paced some more. A distorted voice crackled out of the buzzer unit. Silence. A security guard appeared, then disappeared. The taxi driver paced some more. Two men appeared. No white coats. Plain trousers. Sneakers. Open shirts. Name badges dangling from breast pockets. They escorted Ariran through several locked doors, down the ward corridor, and into the main dining room. Minty-blue, wipe-clean chairs with wooden frames. Matching tables. Empty plastic cups strewn around. Sweet wrappers. Dried mince and potato on the tabletop. Ariran was told to sit and wait.

After several hours, bodies began to appear. One by one they came. Shuffling in hospiTech slippers along the shiny vinyl floor. Flopping into chairs. Nobody sat at Ariran's table. Then came the trolley of food. Covered plastic trays. Mince and mash. A spoonful of peas. Orange squash in tiny plastic containers with foil lids. Everyone received a tray except

Ariran. A paliTech collected the unopened squash cartons. Took them to the office. Stuffed them in her bag. They were ideal for her kids' lunch boxes. Trays of half-empty plates were stacked back on the trolley. A man, dressed entirely in black, wheeled it away. A cheap gastric funeral. The bodies departed too. A zephyr of shuffling despair. Some to watch TV. Some to sleep. Some for an evening meandering in and out of rooms, down corridors, and back again. Ariran didn't move.

At eleven in the evening, a paliTech appeared. She glared at Ariran and barked, 'Bedtime, lights out!'

'Where's my bed?' he asked.

'Probably where you left it.'

'At home? Can I go home now?'

The paliTech leant into his face, gritting her teeth as she spoke. 'Listen, funny boy, bed now, or I'll have to get someone to put you to bed.'

'But I don't know where it is, nobody has shown—'

'Right. You asked for it.' She turned on her heels and marched off. Ariran heard voices. It was difficult to hear what was being said. A low voice. Calm. Then the paliTech. High-pitched. Irate. It sounded like she said, 'That fucking bald cunt down there.' Footsteps. She reappeared with two men. One was short and fat. Clean-shaven. Effeminate in speech. The other was tall and fat. Stringy moustache, like a horse. Brash Eastern accent. Another short interrogation followed. Between the three of them, they figured out that Ariran was new. They disappeared. The two men returned at midnight.

Eastern spoke first. 'Bed iz ready.'

'Yes, c'mon lovely, follow me', said the other, beckoning with his finger.

The mattress was firm latex. Thick plastic cover. Smelled of sweat and urine. Strong overtones of disinfectant. It made Ariran's face itch. He had a roommate. A tall man lying on top of his bed. Sunglasses. Arms folded across his chest. Catatonic. The faint rise and fall of his abdomen, the only indication he was alive.

Ariran spent the night lying on top of his bed, watching a

dripping tap. The tiny metal sink was bolted to the wall adjacent to the door. Each drip drummed out a flat, short-lived, metallic thop. Occasionally, the sound seemed to change slightly. Mostly, each drip was identical to the last. For hours, Ariran gave this process his full attention. The gradual swelling of the water droplet. The almost imperceptible quiver as the increasing mass of water tried to cling to the tap in defiance of gravity. Finally, defeated, the drop dripped in a silent fall, ending with that reassuring thop, beckoning the next drop to form above it.

Eight-thirty in the morning. A voice shouted, 'BREAKFAST!' The shout started in the middle-distance and gradually got louder. Sometimes, it was slightly muffled as the shouter's head bobbed through the gap of an open door and into a room. Ariran heard some shuffling outside. Roommate didn't move. Neither did he. At midday, the voice shouted, 'LUNCH!' Ariran contemplated getting up. When the call for dinner came, he mustered the strength to stand. Roommate's head moved slightly in Ariran's direction.

'You ... new?' asked Roommate, with a low breathy rasp.

'Yeah, well, new here, I'm not generally new, if you know what I mean.'

'Oh ... you're one of them.'

'One of what?'

'A pedant.'

'A pendant?'

'See what I mean.'

'Just trying to be—'

'Not interested pal.'

Ariran shuffled to the dining room. Found a place at one of the tables. A plastic tray was shoved in front of him. It had a flap of paper sticking out from under the lid. His misspelled name was on it. He lifted the lid. Mince and mash with a small spoonful of peas. A small plastic container of juice was plonked down next to his plate. He ripped off the foil lid, spilling half the juice onto the table. Gulped the rest down. As he drank, he remembered that he hadn't had a drink for twenty-four hours. Nor had he been to the toilet. Suddenly,

his senses awoke. The room was noisy. Very noisy. There was an old lady on the far side of the room. Sat alone. Next to a walking frame. Weeping into her mash. She glanced up. Saw Ariran looking in her direction. Her eyes narrowed. The crying stopped. With one swift movement of her left arm, she hurled the walking frame at him. Ariran ducked. It went over his head and crashed into the wall. A small chunk of plaster chipped away.

One of the paliTechs ran over to the woman. 'FUCKING HELL, JULIE, WHAT ARE YOU DOING?! DAVE, STEVE, SHE'S OFF AGAIN!'

Dave and Steve came running in. Dave was the guy with the horse moustache. Steve, the chubby one with the effeminate voice. The rubber soles of their white sneakers squeaked in panic on the vinyl floor. Julie screamed and sobbed as she was bundled roughly into a wheelchair. The noise faded as she was wheeled down the corridor. A door slammed. A lock snapped. The paliTech picked up the walking frame and placed it in the corner. Ariran ate his mince and mash.

After dinner, a different paliTech came to talk to Ariran. Small. Calm. Smelled of stale cigarettes.

'Hello, Ariran, I need to talk through some questions', she said.

'Sure. Do you mean ask?'

'What?'

'Nothing. Can I go home now?'

'No. You only came in yesterday.'

'Yes, but I'd like to leave.'

'Er, it says here you came in voluntarily?'

'Yes. So I should be able to leave voluntarily too, right?'

'Well, hang on, nobody forced you in here.'

'No. Well, not really. I didn't really know though. The taxi —'

'You are suicidal, aren't you?'

'I guess. It's more that I don't see the point in living and feel trapped here. In this world. In this body. But I'd really like to go home and sleep now. In my own bed.'

'Well, Ariran, you see, the thing is, if you try to leave, we'll have to section you.'

'Section me?'

'Yes, we can keep you here against your will.'

'But that's what you're doing now?'

'No, you're here voluntarily.'

'But I'm asking to leave, and you're saying no?'

'Yes. That's right. You see, if you come in, and you're suicidal, we can section you. Currently, you are here voluntarily, but if you try to leave we'll section you. To protect you from yourself. I mean, nobody sane would come in here voluntarily, would they?'

'I guess, but ... is this a trap? It makes no sense.'

'Look. Let me put it this way. If you are here voluntarily, you might get out in a week or two. If we section you, it will be at least three weeks, maybe months.'

'So I'm being held here?'

'Do you suffer from paranoia?'

'What?'

'You're showing signs of persecution complex.'

'What? No! Okay. I get it. I'll give it a couple of days.'

She smiled. 'That's a good chap. Take your medication. Keep in line. Maybe you'll get out sooner than you think.' She winked. 'Oh, and you have a meeting lined up tomorrow with the psychTech. Your wife has been asked to come.'

'George?'

'Who's George?'

'My wife.'

'Your wife is called George? Do you mean husband? Are you gay? You look gay?'

'What do you mean?'

'Your hair, or lack of, isn't it a gay thing? Easier to clean up after?' She winked again.

'I don't know, I've a medical condition.'

'Sure. So your, ahem, *wife*, George, she's coming to the meeting. Was that her parent's choice, George?'

'No. No. It's Georgina. She likes being called George.'

'Ah, a tomboy. An inbetweenie.'

'What? No ... she—'

'Okay. I've got to go. It's smoke break. There'll be mayhem if I don't go to give them a light. Nobody is allowed to carry a lighter except me. Do you smoke?'

'No.'

'Okay, good work. We're done here. I might try and catch you later in the week for another talk.'

When Ariran woke the following morning, the first thing he became aware of was the stink from his armpits. He asked to take a shower. Dave sat outside to monitor Ariran's towel. He positioned one of his chair legs to keep the door slightly ajar. Ariran hung his blue hospiTech pyjamas over a plastic knob next to the shower. They fell on the floor. He tried again, cursing the impracticality of it being a knob and not a hook. They fell onto the floor again. He left them there. Parted the shower curtain. Stood over the drain hole. Two dials jutted out from the wall. One for flow. The other for temperature. The shower head was embedded in the ceiling. There were no pipes or fixings anywhere. He realized he had no soap, but daren't ask now he was naked. As the water washed over him, it brought more presence to his body. This induced panic. He was trapped. What was this place? What had he done to justify being held prisoner? Why was there a guard sitting with his chair wedged in the door? Being kept against his will felt unbearable. He had an overwhelming urge to kill himself. To escape. Peering through the steam, he looked around the room. The only potential lay in the pyjamas. If he made a noose with them, he could ... but there was nothing to hang them on.

'YOU OKAY IN THERE?' shouted Dave.

'Er, yes, fine.'

Suicide would have to wait. Ariran switched the shower off. Reached his hand out through the crack in the door. Dave passed the towel. After getting dressed, Ariran was called for his meeting with the psychTech. George had arrived. She was waiting in the consultation room. When Ariran entered, she gave him a hug and handed him a plastic bag. 'Here, I've brought you some clothes, and your toothbrush and stuff.'

‘Oh, thanks, George. I hate it in here.’

‘I don't blame you. So many locked doors. Are you okay?’

‘Yeah. I guess. They won't let me leave.’

‘How long will you be here?’

‘I don't know, hopefully not long.’

‘I told your mum, she's coming to visit tomorrow.’

‘Oh fuck, I wish you hadn't.’

‘Sorry. I thought—’

‘I know, never mind. I'd rather not have visitors. I don't want you to come here, seeing me like this.’

‘It's okay.’

‘No. No, it isn't. Please don't come.’

George looked hurt. ‘But what about your stuff? I've only brought one change of clothes, I just grabbed them quick.’

‘Oh. Er, yeah. I guess you best come again if you can bring some. Thanks. I'm sorry.’

The psychTech entered. A short, thin mekaZien man. Metal-rimmed spectacles. Badly bloodshot eyes. A demeanour that suggested he was tired and unwell. After flicking through a couple of sheets of paper on a clipboard, he looked up at George and then turned to Ariran. ‘Is this your mother?’

‘What? No. This is my wife, George.’

George was mortified. Ariran felt terrible. It was his fault she'd had to suffer such a terrible insult.

The psychTech continued. ‘Ah, sorry. Yes, er, it's my eyes you see, so you're here voluntarily?’

‘So I'm told.’

‘Okay. So keep taking the medication and we'll see you next Tuesday.’

‘Is that it? Next Tuesday? But I want to go home. Maybe for the weekend?’

The psychTech laughed. ‘No, no, no. We'll see you next Tuesday. Oh, and ask your wife to take that plastic bag away with her. You can't have that. And no belts, cords, shoelaces, or wires.’

Ariran said goodbye to George. Carried the bundle of loose clothes back to his room. Went back to bed. Watched the

dripping tap. What else was there in life? It was all passing time. Exercise. Parties. ServiToil. Busy-ness. Mind-numbing TV. All tools for edging unconsciously towards the grave. A dripping tap was as good as anything.

Focusing on the drip was hard. Physically, he felt hazy and slow. Inside, he was incredibly anxious. A sensation like a panic-stricken bee, trapped in the dough of a thick dumpling. Ariran tried to recall all the places he'd been to on the ward. Furniture. Windows. Doors. Objects. Nothing seemed viable. Maybe running at a wall head-first. Perhaps he could sneak a pen off a paliTech. Stab his brain through his nostril. His thoughts were interrupted by Roommate.

'Try anything, they'll section you for three months ... minimum', he croaked.

'What?'

'I said, try anything, they will section you for three months. Girl down the way there. She's been here since February. You know. Alice. The blond with the black eyes. The one everyone wants to fuck, but only if she was strapped down. First week, she tried to slice up her arm with a broken plastic knife. Made a right mess. Then she tried to break out over the fence. Got her toes stuck. Fell flat on her face. They tripled her dose. Sleeps all the time now. Except when she walks into things or falls out of bed. They put her in solitary and beat her at least once a week. Her family don't believe her.'

'Since February? That's four months.'

'Good at maths too? What a talented man you are. Anyway, she won't talk to the psychTech now. She can't go until she's normal enough. It's the meds, she dribbles.'

'So why don't they drop the dose?'

'Dunno, guess they will, some point.'

'I'm Ariran by the way.'

'Hello Ariran by the way.'

'Ha, who's the pendant now?'

'Shut up. You're not funny. They reckon I'm paranoid.'

'Who?'

'You ask too many questions, are you with them?'

'Who?'

‘You.’

‘With who?’

‘Are you with them?’

‘Am I with who?’

‘Are you poliTech?’

‘You know about the time-poliTech?’

‘Never heard of them.’

‘Maybe you're with them?’

‘Don't flip it back on me. I'm schizo, not stupid. That tap's driving me up the wall. It's part of their interrogation. Won't break me.’

‘Whose interrogation?’

‘You won't get me to talk. Tap or no tap.’

Ariran ventured over to the sink and turned the tap. It stopped dripping. He coughed out a laugh.

‘What you laughing at?’ asked Roommate.

‘The tap, I—’

‘Oh, I got you. The man who laughs at taps.’

‘No, it was the dripping. I was watching the dripping, didn't think to—’

‘Yeah, okay, Taps. Good cop, bad cop is it, Taps?’

‘It's Ariran and I'm—’

‘I know who it is, Taps. You won't get me to talk lad.’ He rolled onto his side and didn't speak again.

Roommate started going to meals more regularly after that. He always sat at a place where he could see Ariran. Never at the same table. It looked like he was watching through his sunglasses, but they were so dark it was difficult to tell. Occasionally, Roommate would nod slowly in his direction. An indication that he thought he knew something that he thought Ariran should know he knew. Something Ariran knew that he shouldn't know, but that roommate thought he did know, even though he didn't, and he wanted Ariran to know that he knew that Ariran knew that he knew that Ariran knew something that he wasn't supposed to know. Or so Ariran thought.

40. Discharge

Ariran was reviewed one-to-one by a psychTech on three further occasions. He was careful to act depressed but slightly more talkative and optimistic each time. Best not to act too happy or too sad. That could be construed as the sign of some disorder or other. Self-discipline was the best way out. Spontaneity was dangerous. He turned up for all meals. Ate as much as he could stomach. Collected his medication on time. Went to bed before eleven. At the sign of any trouble, he would leave the room calmly and go elsewhere. Usually his bed. Each day he smiled once more than the previous day. He prohibited himself from winking at any cost, lest it be misinterpreted. He didn't laugh at anything, under any circumstances, but did permit himself a wry smile if something genuinely funny occurred. Strangely, he began to enjoy being there. Nobody was expected to be normal. Not even the staff. There were no demands for him to perform any function or produce anything, and all his basic physical needs were met.

One day, he ventured into the quiet room. He'd not bothered before because, despite its name, the room was also the television room. Always resounding with a relentless blare of plastic cheer. Talk shows. Quiz shows. Competitions. Current affairs. A constant barrage of titivation and vacuous trivia. No historical context. No in-depth discussion. No intelligence required. Centuries of divisive social and political history condensed into banal snippets, interlaced with flashing lights and candified music. Volume-enhanced advertisements smashed the viewer's attention every ten minutes. Occasionally, the tone changed to the drab percussion of news bulletins. Interviews with eleLazi spokesmen, vomiting up hollow mantras. Constant reminders of their post-modern god, growth. Business leaders promised

to feed that beast. To help the nation grow. Into what they never said. Ariran hoped it would grow up some day. Then they could announce that the nation had finished growing. Finally reached maturity. They could follow up with a permanent national holiday to celebrate. But nobody ever spoke about the end goal, like it had never dawned on them that there should be one.

Ariran imagined the nation as a child with a growth disorder. Every year, getting taller and flabbier. Eating and eating until its bones crumpled under its own weight. Until it burst into a bloody, gelatinous mess. He couldn't stand to hear any more. But there was no remote for the TV. Nor any buttons. Just a power cable round the back. He reached around and switched the power off at the wall. It was then, in the instant bliss of quiet, he saw the dog-eared novel. After blowing the dust off, and removing the desiccated body of a spider, he examined it. Well-worn but fully intact. The cover design was dark and magical. It felt like a gift from the divine.

The book transported Ariran to a world far from life on the ward. He stopped taking his meds after that. Pills under the tongue. Down the toilet. Nobody checked. Not much else happened. Except one lunchtime. Julie threw a bottle of barley squash at him. A full bottle with the lid on. Ariran felt the draft of air as it whistled past his nose. A slight caress, like a fairy flapping its wings. It left an indentation in the wall, a finger's width above the chip the walking frame made. Julie was carted off again. Nobody knew where it came from. Not the sudden outburst of temper nor the full, unopened bottle of barley squash. The bottle didn't burst. A paliTech slipped it into her bag to take home.

After being locked up for fourteen days, Ariran was discharged. The sun was shining brightly. Everything looked intensely vivid. He caught the bus home alone. Sat near the back by the engine. It whined and roared, rattling the seats. He looked at the other passengers. Expressionless, waxy, iridescent faces. Watching brought on a strange sensation. Like squashing a slug between the finger and thumb while drinking a sweet cherry kirsch. Pleasant and refreshing but

also repulsively vulgar and sickly. He'd been mostly indoors in the hospiTech. Now his eyes couldn't adjust to the daylight properly. He squinted, but it made his cheeks and forehead feel uncomfortable, so he relaxed his face. The light streamed in again, stinging his eyes. He spent the journey twitching.

The bus neared his stop. Ariran pressed the red button to indicate he wanted to alight. Worried that the driver might not have noticed, he worked his way to the front. Orange poles and leather loops. Clinging tightly. The bus bounced over a pothole. Ariran banged his knee hard against the back of a chair. Damn roads. Potholes everywhere. The bus screeched to a halt ten metres past the stop. Ariran limped off towards home.

At the front door, he rattled his key into the stiff lock. As it turned, he felt the brass shaft bending. Panic. It could snap. He'd end up locked out. Dark clouds were looming. George wouldn't be home for hours. He'd have to sit outside waiting. Or knock at a neighbour's house. A conversation he really couldn't deal with.

The lock opened fine. He pushed the door open. Saw a photograph of George. Remembered he was married. Wondered where she'd been while he was in hospiTech. Then, remembered she'd visited several times. She stayed even when he'd asked her to go home. Two hours. Watching him read his book and flash the occasional scowl her way. He hadn't wanted her there. He'd been content. No past. No future. Just reading. Mince, mash, and peas. Watching Roommate watching him. When George visited, she brought the outside with her. Smells of busy-ness and obligation. The money-world. The time-world. Aromas that contaminated the ward with their impure stench, dissolving the fantasy landscapes of his book into the suffocating ordinariness of the economic prison.

Ariran wondered what people like him did without a George. If he didn't have one, he'd be homeless or dead. Citizen's fund payments wouldn't cover the rent, bills, and food. Even when they were both in serviToil, there was barely any surplus. They'd had to borrow for most of the things that

made life seem okay. Cheap wedding. Cheap holidays. Cheap wine. Cheap medicine for cheap labour. But it wasn't enough to stop the slow dying of their inner light. The treadmill of life was too powerful. It had trained and subsumed George. But not Ariran. Not yet. For him, a meaningless, robotic life was still worse than death. Life was a mystery to be explored, not a chore to be completed. He knew that others found him absurd. You were supposed to 'get on', 'get with the program', 'play the game'. And he preferred not to.

In the days following his release, he struggled to do anything. Mostly, he lay on the floor, watching the sky through the window. The sun. Birthed. Rising. Radiant. Falling. Dying. Clouds drifting by. Slices of moon sliding across the darkness. Rain hammering against the glass.

A flood of memories crashed into his peace. The tiny garden in the old house, the one they sold. The little plastic greenhouse he'd left behind. The summer he grew sweetcorn. Mother's allotment. The smell of thick, wet, heavy soil. Tomatoes in grow bags. Potatoes that split. Brown decay and writhing centipedes. Earth worms. White butterflies. Robins. Sparrows. That was it! That was how he could spend his days. Growing things. Not even that. They would grow themselves. He would help.

Infused with the vision of a new future, Ariran became more active. He kept the home clean and tidy, as he'd almost always done, save for in his darkest of days. Except now, he didn't grumble about it. It was his way of repaying George's kindness. His contribution to the household. He administered the bills. Looked after Lucy. Took her for walks. With what energy he had left, he planted edibles in containers. Courgettes. Tiny tomatoes. Radish. Salad greens. He made plans for the little plot at the back of the house. It had never been much of anything. A mere patch of wild grass that he ran a mower over once a month.

By the following spring, he'd transformed the patch into a productive food garden. Built a two-step terrace. Erected a poly tunnel. Laid a slab path. Made a wooden bench. Each day, he spent time sitting on the bench, listening. Birdsong.

The rustling wind. A gentle and kind way of being. No aggressive busy-ness. It made him feel strong. He wondered if life would've turned out differently if he'd been raised in a house with a garden. There was something invigorating about them. Although, when examined closely, the garden was nothing more than a chaotic brawl. An endless guerilla war between competing species. Between groups within species. Between individuals within groups. Insects. Birds. Rodents. Bacteria. Fungi. Plants. A battlefield influenced, but not controlled, by the personal whims of the gardener. Like the squabble of geopolitics, some participants temporarily or permanently allied with others. Some remained mutually hostile. All sought nothing more than the protection and expansion of their own interests.

Gardening invoked a deep curiosity about the operations of nature. Ariran signed up for a degree in biological science, focusing on plant growth. On the outside, he seemed more upbeat and optimistic. Inside, there was still darkness. During the worst spells, he propped himself up with beer and whisky. He'd learned to stop once the spells of anxiety and depression passed. George was happy he'd found a new focus. It was easier to explain to friends and family. No need to hide the fact that he was without serviToil and mentally ill. Their relationship remained calm, civilized, and caring. Both used the word love, but what it meant to either of them wasn't clear.

Despite being fairly active, he'd tested his joints to their limit. Often working in his own garden with considerable pain. Full-time gardening was out of the question. He had to aim for something more academic. Teaching, maybe research. For his final year, he chose to attend a distant campus with a stronger focus on theory and research. It meant living away from home during term time. George raised no objections. Naively, he thought the break might reinvigorate the marriage. It was an exciting move, but not an easy decision. Lucy was getting old. She had fits of doggy dementia. He'd been able to comfort her when she got distressed. With him gone, there'd be nobody there during the day. Her quality of

life was deteriorating fast. Less keen on walks. Often in physical pain. George and Ariran decided to talk to the theriTech. Explore any potential treatment that might help. Ask if he thought it would be best to put Lucy to sleep.

'So, you've come to have her put down?' asked the theriTech.

George began to reply, 'I guess—'

'Er, no', Ariran interrupted.

'Ah, your wife, she said on the phone you'd decided it would be best?'

'You did?'

George squirmed in her chair. 'Well—'

'I don't know anything about that,' said Ariran angrily, 'I thought we were going to *discuss* it, not *do* it. You're as bad as Mother.'

'Should I leave you two alone for a moment?' enquired the theriTech.

'No. I'm not sure what my wife told you, I wanted to know about any potential treatment for Lucy. I'm going to be away and wanted to know if anything could help her remain calm during the day when she's alone. Putting her to sleep must be the last option.'

'There's nothing really, she's already on medication for her bladder, yes?'

'Yes.'

'And if nobody will be home during the day, it will be difficult ...' The theriTech flashed a look at George, prompting her to speak.

'Ariran, it might be best.'

It felt like an ambush. Ariran looked at the theriTech then at George. 'So, you're ready to do this now?'

'Yes, we have time', said the theriTech, glancing at his watch.

George remained silent, her unflinching gaze fixed on the theriTech.

Ariran looked at Lucy. She sat patiently on the floor. Her big brown eyes. Innocent. Watching. Waiting. It pained him to think of life without her furry cuddles. Then he remembered

the smell of dog piss. The shaking fits. The confusion. The pain as she walked. It would only get worse. He imagined, he hoped, if roles were reversed, she would have the mercy to put him to sleep too.

Lucy let the theriTech inject tranquillizer without fuss. Ariran held her in his arms as she became drowsy. Then he carried her to the metal table in the back room. More of a sink than a table. She was laid on some towels to protect her from the cold metal surface. Then, the theriTech injected the final solution from a large syringe filled with blue liquid. George and Ariran whispered comforting words as she slipped out of consciousness. Her damp black nose twitched for the last time. Then she shit herself. A nice, healthy, solid shit. Easy for the theriTech to remove with his rubber-gloved hand and drop delicately into a nearby bin.

It was over. Painless and fast. Ariran felt envious. He wished that his own demise could be as humane, but it seemed unlikely. After driving home in silence, he walked up the path to the house. Lucy's old collar dangled limply from his hand. Once inside, he collapsed to the floor and wept. He hadn't cried so much since Clara died.

Ariran's year at uniTech passed quickly. He excelled. When he returned home to George, he was full of life and hope. Within days, the crusty shell of normalcy began to encase him again. He wondered if it was George. Was it living with her that was bringing him down? Or, maybe, the unseen forces of society, willing him to become an obedient, functioning citizen again; all signs of rebellion eradicated. He almost obliged. Applied for any serviToil in the area that suited his new expertise. At interview, he could never quite adjust his glow to match the requisite enthusiasm. There was something cold and utilitarian about it all. Learning was a challenge, but it was fulfilling. He'd been able to exercise considerable discretion over what he focused on, and how and when he studied. ServiToil, on the other hand, was geared to robotic thinking and emotional prostitution.

Soon, dread filled his mornings. Suicidal thoughts

returned. In his heart, he knew that if he entered serviToil, he'd be dead in six months. Another nutter jumping from a motorway bridge, holding up the traffic. An inconvenient statistic. A bit of gossip at the local shop for small-minded villagers. They'd discuss the strange, quiet, bald man who never did much. An odd man who didn't belong. They would assume he was unintelligent or on drugs. One or two would moan about the traffic jam that made them late home. About how inconsiderate it was for people to kill themselves like that. They'd ask why he couldn't have stayed home and hung himself, like one of the local shop assistants a couple of years earlier. She was still wearing her shop uniform when they found her. Some assumed she was seeking escape from an unhappy marriage. Others said it was the pain from her arthritis that drove her to despair. Ariran knew why. If he took serviToil at the local shop, he'd end up hanging himself too. He abandoned his search and applied for a postgraduate degree.

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41. Beauty

Her voice was heavenly. Each sound delivered slowly. Thoughtfully. A soft lotSkav lilt. Whipped consonants. Smooth, honeyed vowels. Ariran was hit head-on. He'd been caught cruising. Half asleep. Didn't see it coming. Too fast. His heart burst. Melted in enzymatic flames. No longer a meat robot, drowning in a stagnant pool of learned pragmatism. He'd become a trans-dimensional, crystal flower. Reborn in each conscious moment. Her earthy brown eyes, and thin, subtle smile, invalidated all questions. He felt real. He felt love. It came from within, not without. So many years wasted, looking in the wrong places. The marriage was over. Not formally. In reality. The good times and the bad. Washed away in a river of joy.

This angel would never love him. Neither did his wife. He toyed with his wedding ring, sliding it up and down his finger. No matter. Golden cascades of light spilled from the dark centre of her eyes, dissolving all pain. A lifetime of disappointment, frustration, anger, and despair. That heavy pressure from above. Forever pushing his head down. Twisting his neck and spine. All gone. He dropped into a rainbow of shadows. An obsidian pillow of silent delight. Her soft lips danced as she spoke. The chatter from the others in the room faded. Briefly, the only sound he heard was the humming of the overhead projector. His body merged with the vibrating air. Then, nothing. No noise. No vision. No future. No past. No desire. Awash with peace and beauty.

Her name was Smukali. Sublime darkness. Plain clothes. No make-up. The allure of a black hole. The mere sight of her caused the top of his head to tingle. He felt the urge to speak, but let it pass. Words would be mere phantoms, dancing in a moonless sky.

The lecture began. Ariran leant back casually in his chair.

Presentation slides flashed up. The Professor was lively. His voice rising and falling rhythmically like a baritone saxophone. A caffeine-fuelled, vocal jazz for intellectuals. His art was wasted. Ariran's attention was only in love. He wondered what she saw when she looked at him? An intelligent and eager student? A desperate, middle-aged, car crash of a man? A suicide in waiting? A lonely, frightened boy, trapped in a weathered, decaying body? A spark of the divine, trapped in a flesh prison? A self-aware algorithm, involuntarily manifesting within an electro-magnetic matrix? A murderer? A bore? The question didn't trouble him. He was none of those things. He knew now, his essence was joy. A golden flower, blooming from a crack, on the peak of a hostile mountain. A fixed, effortless smile, on the face of a corpse. Soon, a day would come with blessed release. Glow-consciousness would burst through the crown of his head. Then, he would slough off his awful body-sack. Cut loose the earth-bound bridle line. Let the kite of his soul roam free with the cosmic wind. In that timeless moment, he would arise from the putrid blood and bone, ready to inhabit a new realm of pure and radiant love. This was the fate of all, once unbound from their otiose beliefs.

When the lecture ended, he packed his blank notepad away and sat for several minutes in awe. The rest of the class scurried from the room, keen to move on to the next part of their day. Smukali left with them. Ariran was in no rush. He'd glimpsed eternity.

Back home, he placed the plates of food gently on the table. Fetched George a glass of cordial. Not too strong, not too weak. Exactly how she liked it. They always had dinner together. A habit Ariran had cultivated when they rented their first flat. As a child, he'd been raised on soulless TV dinners. Plates on knees. No conversation. The mindless drone of the idiot box. He despised it. Sharing a meal together was novel and exciting at first, but soon stagnated.

After twenty years, they had little to discuss except minutiae from daily events. The density of traffic. Minor changes in weather. Food prices. ServiToil. George told him

lengthy stories about trivial office politics. The way spreadsheet columns were unfairly distributed among team members. Snarky remarks made about the font used in a pie chart legend. Bitchy gossip, whispered between toilet cubicles, occupied by snorting tramps. He tried hard to listen but never grasped why she was talking. Her solipsistic drone lacked context or emotion. No big picture. No essence, indicating why the story was important. Her only apparent motivation, to fill the silence. She could have hummed a melody. It would have meant more to him. Yet, he knew if Smukali were sat there, she could talk about anything, and he'd be enchanted. Unlike George, she had a song in her heart. A dynamic melody that every word danced to. Sometimes sad, sometimes angry, sometimes joyful. When Smukali looked at the sky, acknowledging its glorious radiance, or its melancholy shades of grey, the sky looked back in honorific splendour.

Ariran's expressive expositions about life, nature, and being, were equally irrelevant to George. They had nothing to do with anything. She wished he'd shut up. His repetitive, abstract drivel tasted of dust. All he did was grind up rocks with his sharp-toothed mind and blow the sand at her. The way he stared off to one side. Those empty, glassy eyes, haunted by shadows. He couldn't even see that she was there. She felt like a ghost. The day they married was her funeral. In its entirety, their relationship had been little more than a cheap firework. A quick burn. A flash of colour. A disappointing fizzle. The charred, cardboard husk, fallen from the heavens. Discarded in a ditch. Left to decay. They'd both been too proud to face the truth. Her music was beyond the range of his hearing, and his beyond hers.

Ariran looked into George's eyes, searching within for the feelings he'd had when they first met. The excitement. The joy. He was sure it had been there. Butterflies in the stomach. Satisfying kisses. No, they were never really satisfying. The closeness of sex. No, not that either. It had always been a little tense and awkward. In fact, through the countless physical interactions he'd had with George, Ariran had come to view the body as something slightly repulsive. Kissing,

something he loved doing as a youth, became alien. Now he saw tongues exclusively as muscles used to push food down the throat. For shaping noises. Communicating needs. Lips were part of the same team. The outer rim of an orifice, serving the tongue, like a sphincter serves a colon. Kissing had become an absurd act of rubbing slimy lumps of muscle together. An exchange of fluids meant for digestion. The transfer of microbes. He speculated that the motivation for kissing was probably caused by some fungus or bacteria. A complex biochemical signalling pathway deployed to hijack the nervous system, to create the impulse to touch lips and tongues, transferring the microbe from host to host as it sought to expand its territory. Except, when he thought of kissing Smukali. That seemed like a gateway to heaven. A method for communing with an angel. Even the thought of kissing her anus failed to disgust him.

He scoured the recesses of his mind for something that could explain why he'd once believed he was in love with George. There was a cherished memory. From their early days of courting. He was lying awake in bed. George's head rested on his chest. She was snoring gently. Like a purring cat. Time dissolved into eternal union. Surely a happy memory? Proof of the strength of his feelings. He was convinced he'd felt warm and fuzzy. Needed and connected. Caring and cared for. Yet, as he mused over his recollection, it seemed to change. He remembered lying on the bed, staring at the thin curtains drawn across the window. They were faintly illuminated by an orange streetlamp. He was absorbing every detail in the folds of the fabric and the shadows they cast, trying to figure out how to move George's head without waking her. All he wanted to do was roll over. Get some sleep. Escape the dull pain in his chest from the pressure caused by her cheek bone. Tired. Trapped. Frustrated.

George pushed the last forkful of limp lettuce into her mouth. As she chewed slowly, searching for some remnant of flavour, she placed her fork and knife together, handles in the four o'clock position. She knew she'd become passionless and mechanical. It had been that way for a long time. Maybe

forever. But she was sure there was a time when she was younger. Before him. A time when life seemed exciting. When her laughter was full and round, not forced and hollow. It was Ariran. So wonderful at first. So attentive and alive. Then, he transformed her into stained dishes and discarded toothpaste caps. Into an alcoholic's clumsy handmaid. Into the launchpad for a rocket, aimed at the farthest vacuum of despair. His mind soared in the distant sky, touching formless clouds. Ideas she couldn't understand and had no interest in. He was always busy with something. Some project or other. Gardening. Reading. Playing music. Nothing was straightforward. There was always some mystical edge.

Whenever she shared things that were important to her, he just glared or stared out of the window. It was obvious he couldn't stand her company for long. She was in the way. He even made her feel guilty for watching TV. For sullying his ears with ordinary drama. She was unable to recall why she'd married him. So many years seemed to pass in a blur. That boy from her youth. That had felt different. And Jack. The guy at work. He made her feel so alive. She loved being in the office just for a chance to talk to him. Every time she left work and headed home, her bones filled with trepidation. But she didn't know how to escape. He might kill himself. The guilt would destroy her. So she pretended everything was okay. Salved and numbed her heart. Mostly a hotchpotch of novel mahiThist candies. Yoga DVDs. Chemical-soaked incense. Oxymoronic mindfulness meditation. Wrapped and packaged for retail. A conscription of cultural practices, once substantive bastions of the sacred, now sold as hollow scaffolding. A rusting frame, propping up the nihilism of materialistic pragmatism. That's all their marriage was.

42. IbHar

George's snoring became intolerable. It kept Ariran awake for hours. He moved into the spare room again. Better for them both. She had the double bed to herself. Her snoring wouldn't disturb him. He wouldn't disturb her when he went to bed late, or when he woke in the night, in sweat and panic, still fighting his childhood demons. The spare room was adjacent to the bathroom. Snoring exchanged for banging pipes.

It was while laying in bed, listening to the thud, thud, thud of a minor plumbing fault, that he realized that the concept of freedom was one of the prison bars of existence, not its antithesis. Freedom was part of the ideological cement which held the cobbles of civilization together. Yet, only the wild and untamed lived freely. Civilians had to clip their beaks and blunt their claws. A paradox that caused the eventual downfall of all civilizations. This incoherent logic seemed to seep into everything. Sleep was something only experienced by the unconscious, but exclusively yearned for by the awake. Like sleep, love was something you could only know partially, from a distance. Or, perhaps, while you were falling into it, or emerging out of it. If you arrived, and opened your eyes, it disappeared. A mirage. Wearing the mask was less traumatic than the horror of removing it and finding nothing there. Emptiness exchanged for delusion. But once truth is known, deception is impossible to restore. Necrosis begins. All concepts disintegrate. Death feeds the seed. A fresh cycle of ignorance is initiated.

The next morning, Ariran moved his clothes out of the main bedroom. The only storage he had in the spare room was a large holdall. He began to minimize his possessions. Anything deemed non-essential was carted off to the charity shop, including the shirt and tie he married in. George filled the space he left. Clothes, shoes, letters, cosmetics, sweet

wrappers, balls of wool, and dead batteries. Like Mother, she had a natural capacity to expand into any void and clog it up with useless tat.

For over a year, they lived as housemates instead of spouses. Short, polite, practical conversations. Silent meals. He wished she'd say something. That she missed him. Missed his touch. Even just a tacit acknowledgement of the distance between them. But there was nothing. George serviToiled, slept, ate, and watched bad TV. A model kutKish. She would have wished he said something meaningful too. But she was all out of wishes.

Ariran completed his master's degree and landed a part-time teaching job. Just enough to live on independently, provided he was frugal. Each day, as he dressed in clothes taken from his holdall, he felt a beckoning to leave. So many years waiting. Yearning for George to engage more deeply. To reach out through the dark fog and make contact. He'd stuck with it for so long. Sure that one day she'd burst from her bubble. Now he realized there was no bubble. It was all in his head. His mask, not hers. Time to quit trying. Let her be herself, whoever that was.

After loading the car with the last of his possessions, he cleaned and vacuumed the house. Took a final walk through each room. In the bathroom, he paused to shed a tear as he replaced the cap on the toothpaste. Downstairs, he spent a few moments sitting at the dining table, spinning his wedding ring around his finger. Then, he removed it swiftly. Placed it on top of the note he'd written. Went outside. Locked the door. Posted his key through the letterbox. The pain was intense. Part of him was dying. He imagined George arriving home. Finding the letter. If, as he suspected, she was really so unaware of his feelings, it would be quite a shock. But part of her would be relieved. It was a necessary step for both of them. He hated to give up. Hated letting go. For all its lack of depth, their relationship had been a lengthy one. Stable. Familiar. Homely. It took considerable courage to walk away, even though he was too cowardly to tell her in person. Had he tried, she would have cried. He would have changed his mind.

Every sinew in his body told him to stay. Try again. But he knew it was attachment, not love. The death throes of an addiction.

George found his note later that evening. She sent him a text. Just to make sure he hadn't killed himself. They agreed to meet at a cafe the next day. Ariran's night was restless. All the things he'd bottled up and closed off began to perforate his cultivated numbness. Love, anger, frustration, longing. A confusing maelstrom of hot emotions. He felt unstable. Raw. But a little more alive.

They met outside the cafe. A polite hello. He had a compulsion to grab her. Hug her. Kiss her. But he stopped himself. He thought of being back there. In the deadness. Even if she wanted him back, things wouldn't change. She wouldn't change. He wouldn't change. It was just part of his psyche trying to resell him the same old delusion. A silver-tongued serpent that had to be slain.

They sat for three hours chatting but very little was said. George talked about the price of coffee. The weather. The embarrassing things her mother said on a recent trip away. How lush the cake was. Some minor conflict at serviToil. How it had seemed strange to eat alone the previous evening. Ariran wondered if drinking coffee and talking about the weather was the best either of them could expect from life. Impulsively, he made an offer to go to a relationship psychTech. George agreed, out of politeness.

Ariran moved into a tiny studio flat near the uniTech where he was teaching. A compact, pleasant space. He could have been happy. But the guy living on the floor below kept slamming doors. Over twenty minor earthquakes a day. It happened at night too. Right through to the small hours. When he fell asleep, he'd soon be woken by a boom and a rattle. Like living in a war zone. Ear plugs caused him pain. Besides, even if he blocked the noise out, he still felt the building shake.

Talking to the guy was no use. He had behavioural issues. Didn't see what the problem was. He was just closing doors. He had to close them after he opened them. It was an

essential part of the way he moved around his flat. If Ariran didn't like it, he could jog on. Soon, Ariran couldn't sleep at all. He began to think of ways he could murder his neighbour just to get one good night's sleep. But when he imagined the scenarios playing out in full, he never managed to get away with it. So, he decided to let the man live.

His dream of forging a new life quickly dissolved in a whirlpool of anxiety and insomnia. All his life he'd been haunted by these meatsacks and their stupid noises. Stomping on ceilings. Honking horns. Revving engines. Drunken shouting. Snoring. Slamming doors. Kicking cans. Whirring power tools. Crying children. Outrageous insults. If it wasn't people, it was something else. Plumbing. The wind. Mating cats. His life was a mantra of unrelenting torture. Continuous drips of barbed malice, falling from a flagitious faucet.

Two months passed. Ariran and George met for another chat. Supposedly to discuss relationship counselling. It was her turn to choose a venue. A city centre bar. He disliked busy places, especially those that served alcohol. It was difficult to go unnoticed for having no hair or eyebrows. People could be cruel at the best of times. Drink made them worse. He loathed being the freak show. Laughed at. Abused. Photographed. Filmed. The place she picked was heaving. Ariran sat forlorn. Stared into his beer. Tried to ignore the glances of sly amusement and cruel sniggers. She was oblivious. Idle remarks about the pub's decor. The design on the beer mats. A family visit she'd planned. The roadworks causing delays with her commute. He walked her to the train station. Returned to his flat alone. It felt like he'd been visited by a ghost. He cried for hours.

As he sobbed, he recalled Mrs Havishan at Doug's funeral. She wept outside as she greeted people. She wept all the way through. She wept as she left. He hadn't killed the kid. Not directly. But he'd let him die. He'd watched. He'd sat in the funeral and pretended to sing hymns to the boy's coffin. Mrs Havishan never knew the truth.

The grief of leaving George triggered more clarity of that

moment. Standing by the railway. Seeing the train coming. Knowing it would hit Doug. Doing nothing. It wasn't because he feared Kuu, but because he wanted to see death. He yearned for it himself. To escape his life. Somewhere deep down, he believed everyone felt the same. Letting Doug die seemed merciful. And he was curious. He wanted to see what happened. It was as expected. There was a being. An awareness capable of feeling pain. Confused about existence. Pulled and pushed by seen and unseen forces. Internal and social. Physical and mental. Then there was a corpse. Silent. Peaceful. Except the mess. That was frightful. But the fright was in his experience, not Doug's.

Letting his marriage die was messy too. Memories of habits. Loneliness. Confusion. It would have been hard enough to move on. But now, terrorized by his neighbour and deprived of sleep, he lost the will to try. He couldn't focus on his work. The naivety of the overprivileged students and their stupid questions annoyed the hell out of him. It was obvious he was trying to sell himself another pipe dream. Life was pointless. Painful. Lonely. Hostile. Not only his life, all life.

The kutKish believed they'd taken a bite from the fruit of the tree of knowledge. It was a lie. They were a toxic mould growing on its surface. Except, perhaps, Smukali. She was the only thing he desired. The very thought of holding her made his heart bloom. He'd never met anybody like her. Never felt what he felt in her presence. It wasn't the usual infatuation—an avalanche of utopian thoughts in her absence; a feeling that she'd make everything okay. When she wasn't there, he felt less obsessed by her. Less in love. But when they were together, he was in a different world. Each time they crossed paths, he was suddenly transported to a new universe. One where he felt at ease and happy. He could easily imagine spending the rest of his life with her. But she already had a partner. And as real as it seemed, he knew his heart was a deceiver. He could trust it no more. Letting go was true freedom. The flat. The teaching. The future. Love. He'd struggled long enough. All this time. All this pain. All for nothing. He wished he'd jumped head first when he was

young. But he hadn't. Since then, like most others, he'd been propelled forward in time by a zombie process. An irrepressible desire to live. A hidden force that kept him on the treadmill, pacing out time. He'd learnt the hard way that positivity was a lie. Hard work and effort rarely paid. It was more like self-harm than self-interest. Love was no better. A permanent splinter in the heart. Fate was a trickster; a gaslighter. Painful emotion asked the question. Stone-cold reason answered. KutKish life was futile and absurd. Now, he would take charge. Stop this unconscious ruler from dominating him. Turn off the dripping tap.

The internet was ripe with suggested suicide methods. If only he'd had access to it as a youth. So many to choose from. Plenty using easily acquired objects or substances. He couldn't get it wrong. Not this time. Yet, there were many reports of people who had. Survivors living with terrible injuries. Some with brain damage. Paralysed. Trapped. Living lives far worse than the one they'd tried to escape. Online advice was unreliable. He needed to devise his own plan. Ariran knew of several deadly plants and wild mushrooms native to his area. But it was February. Options were limited. The evergreen ibHar held promise. It had been mentioned on several suicide forums. Nobody who'd said they planned to take it returned to report failure.

In ancient times, the ibHar was a holy tree. A portal between worlds. The centre of sacred sites. Its toxins were most potent in the winter. Protection from desperate herbivores. Poison for the starving. Careful use could stimulate abortion. Save a child from entering a world of pain. Especially in winter, when food was scarce for ancient tribes. Liberal use would relieve anyone of their material existence. Most of the old trees were gone. Chopped down for timber. Used for fire, weapons, and war ships. But there were plenty of younger specimens dotted around parks and gardens.

Ariran accessed some academic papers on the toxicology of the ibHar. Case reports detailing its use in suicide attempts. It contained compounds that could suppress the central nervous system. The effects were unpleasant, but death was

swifter than with many other types of overdose. There would be discomfort. Nausea. Sweating. Strange sensations. Hallucinations. Cramps. Convulsions. Conscious awareness should be lost within thirty minutes. Cardiac arrest followed. Anywhere from two to ten hours. Hardly the compassionate death afforded to his pet dog, Lucy. But he could suffer a short while for blessed, eternal relief. Three conditions were required to guarantee death. He would need to ingest a lethal dose, prevent vomiting, and ensure nobody found him before it was too late.

Ariran took a trip to a large ibHar forest, some thirty miles away. Spent a morning taking cuttings. Back at the flat, he chopped his harvest into a fine mash. Doused it with a splash of whisky to preserve it. Placed the mush in the freezer. If the science was right, the amount he'd collected and prepared was enough to kill three people. But he was in no hurry. He decided to wait a few weeks. Make sure his final decision was definitely one he wanted to make.

free copy

43. Release

The prospect of no longer existing brought release from attachment. Ariran was emancipated. As a consequence, he began to enjoy every moment to the full. Each mouthful of food. Each walk in the park. Each song he played on his guitar. Memories of life took on a new perspective. Devoid of the need for meaning, he saw things as they were—a sequence of disconnected events. Their chronology, an illusion created by his mind. There was no grand narrative. No progress toward a final resolution. Any story he attached to life was just that. A story. An invention. A brain trying to make sense of the senseless. Sentience in denial of its solipsistic madness. Evolution avoiding its reflection. The kutKish were skilled at this. They ascribed to nebulous, collective narratives. Growth. Progress. Fulfilment. Nation. Actualization. Ascension. Nothing rational because life was irrational. It made universal agreement about the right way to live impossible. Inevitably, conflict and war were a constant feature in kutKish life, keeping in motion the destructive cycle of necrosis and rebirth.

In preparation for his final exit, Ariran developed a monastic routine. He ate alone at a small table next to the window of his studio flat. Watching without judgement. Pigeons pecking. People passing. Dead leaves drifting in the breeze. He was free to act as he wished. Yet, not impelled to do anything at all. No need for serviToil. No need to worry. No need to question. No mad scrambling for vagaries of hope. Everything was fine as it was. He merged with the essence of existence. The still centre of the mad fury.

He decided to visit Mother. An unspoken last goodbye. Mainly out of curiosity. He still disliked her. Why people felt compelled to be habitually positive about their parents mystified him. They didn't choose them. If people could select

their parents, before their childhood indoctrination, very few would pick the ones they got landed with. Still, Mother was the only mother he had. It seemed appropriate to finalize matters in his heart. And he wondered if she'd appear different to his new-found consciousness.

Age had amplified Mother's chaotic habits. The untidiness and hoarding were far worse than they'd been in Ariran's childhood. It was difficult to navigate the filth and clutter of her small home. Much of his time was spent alone in her spare room. On a rare foray out into the street, he found a hedgehog. It gasped for breath. Maggots crawled from its eye sockets, the eyes themselves long consumed. Occasionally, it let out a desperate squeal. Pain and terror. It crawled off the kerbside into the road. He let it go. Being crushed by a car would put it out of its misery. A better way than the agony of a long, lingering, natural death. Maybe it knew what it was doing. Mother appeared. She picked it up and carried it to the garden, placing it in a pile of leaves near the compost bin, to keep it warm. It seemed she had robbed it of potential for rapid release. But within minutes, a gnarly, cinnamon-coloured cat appeared. It dived into the leaves, tearing and clawing at the dying animal. With a final, faint squeak, its innards spilled out. Release after all.

How could anybody say they loved life? It would require love for this banal horror. The disease. The maggots. The pain. Cruel suffering. Death without meaning. Without redemption. That ridiculous, empty gesture by Mother. No doubt she got a little hit from it. A smidgeon of dopamine. A pinch of endorphin. A lick of oxytocin. He hated to see that little creature in such torment. All life led to this. If not to suffer, then to inflict. Soon, he wouldn't have to witness any more of the sick spectacle. Ariran wished the kutKish had more courage. True bravery would face life. See it for what it was, not the fairytale they told themselves. But the kutKish were cowards.

44. Exit

Mother stood at the door. Waved goodbye. Squinted in the sunlight. Screwed up her face, like she was chewing a lemon. Ariran waved back. Watched her disappear out of sight in his rear-view mirror. Absent of sadness.

On arriving home, he took the ibHar concoction out of the freezer to defrost. Piled the last of his possessions into a couple of bin bags. Labelled them, ready for whoever came to clear the place out. His heart ached a little. An emotion driven by his biological programming. A hard-wired response, designed to prevent him from ultimate rebellion. But he was strong enough to overcome it. He ran a hot bath. Opened the window to let the steam out. Through the gap, he could see clouds. Assemblages of gassy, solid, liquidness. He didn't strive to recognize shapes in them, preferring the unfamiliar dance of mysterious wisps. They beckoned him to join them. To fade and dissolve.

After an unusually refreshing night's sleep, he packed his rucksack. Warm clothes. Small tent. Bottle of water. Lethal poison. Map of remote countryside in the far north. Nobody would disturb him there.

The long drive passed quickly. He parked under some trees, near the foot of a mountain, and hiked up for an hour. After a little exploration, he found a small flat area of grass, sheltered by a rocky outcrop, out of sight of the main track. He set camp. In the twilight, he could see across boggy marshland and out to sea. Some described it as the nation's last great wilderness. But even here, he could see the kutKish hyphae. A road. Distant farm buildings. Huge cargo ships off the coast. There was no escape from their activity. Their networks slithered everywhere. Sucking the life from what they found. Transporting it back to the main fungal fruiting body, the city. Making it swell and belch out little spores in need of feeding.

Demanding it extend its filaments further. Deeper. An endless quest for more.

The final rays of sunlight faded. Stars appeared. They looked glorious in the absence of urban light. A thousand radiant dots, peppered across the sky. Shooting stars raced to oblivion. A purple and green glow flashed faintly in the distance. The moon, a beautiful, bright crescent. Even the multitude of junk satellites didn't spoil the view.

Ariran took the poison out of his backpack. Placed it at his side. He'd written a suicide note. A futile sigh. It aimed to explain his exit from life. He read it over by torchlight. His story was so much bigger. More complex. Conflicted and nuanced layers of experience that could never be conveyed concisely. To do it properly would take a book. Maybe two. Nobody would want to read such a long, meandering assemblage of sad ordinariness. No more than they wanted to put a plastic bag over their heads and breathe deeply. What people wanted, especially the kutKish, were condensed summaries. Preferably, just a few words. Something they could hammer into a binary logic. Good or bad. Love or hate. Like or dislike. Thumbs up, thumbs down. Momentarily, Ariran wished he had some way of getting them to understand. One last futile desire. What people think doesn't matter to the dead. He gathered some rocks into a tight circle and set the note alight. The ash fluttered away in the breeze.

Sitting in stillness, he waited for his mind to clear. The moon dipped below the horizon. Self vanished into void. An owl hooted in the distance. Ariran reached for the poison. It had a bitter taste and smelled repulsive. Still, he'd learned as a child that awful smelling and tasting things were good for you. He swallowed the lot. For a few minutes, he wanted to retch. Meditation helped calm his body. Accept the poisonous mixture.

The toxins began their purge. His mouth stung and tingled. His heart beat like the footsteps of a panicked mouse. Fever kicked in. He lay down. Flat on his back. Arms at his side. Hot and cold waves flushed over his skin. Sweating. Trembling. Heart, tight. Head, crushed. Veins bulged, then deflated.

Organs and flesh became numb.

The owl hooted again. Louder this time. The sound electrified his nerves. His body began reverberating. Palpitations. Twitching. Chaotic fluttering in his chest. Agony and ecstasy. The fire of poison consumed him. Moon and stars blurred. The material world dissolved. A tsunami of darkness. For a moment, he experienced nothing but pure awareness. All bodily sensations gone. Even his breath and the beat of his heart. He became aware of a bright light. Far in the distance. It moved closer. A large yellow glow. A familiar looking glow.

'You?' accused Ariran.

'Who else?'

'But, you were a hallucination.'

'No, Ariran. You were the hallucination. It seems you have brought that to an end now.'

'Who are you? Are you the eleLazi?'

'No, Ariran. The eleLazi, as you call them, are in our control, but we are not them. They are precisely who you thought they were.'

'Who—'

'Shhh. You have no need to question further. Besides, what would you do with such knowledge?'

'At least I might know why. What it was all for. What it was all about.'

'And then what would you do? Who would you tell? You're dead, remember.'

'Well, nobody ... but I'd know, maybe it would make some sense.'

'No Ariran. One thing you guessed correctly is that there's no sense to any of this. Not for you.'

'You've been in control all along?'

'In a way, yes. But in another way, no.'

'Was all my life decided for me?'

'Predetermined, not decided.'

'Why? I mean, it all seemed so pointless. Did you really plan all that?'

'Predetermined, Ariran, not planned. You're focusing too

much on yourself. If you look at a picture, and zoom into a pixel, really close up, there's no way of understanding it. Its hue. Its position. The adjacent elements. It's senseless unless you know the whole.'

'But I want to know the whole.'

'You can't. And you don't *really* wish to. You think you do, but it's an illusion because you cannot possibly know what you're wishing for. Such a desire is caused by the same program that, until recently, shunted you through your life. But now it has no purpose.'

'What was its purpose? You said—'

'Ariran, do be quiet. Think of this. Do you remember driving a large truck down the motorway before getting stuck in traffic many years ago? There was a crash. Two sports cars and a four-wheel drive.'

'The truck? Er ... yes, vaguely.'

'Do you recall a migrating duck almost flying into your windscreen?'

'No, I—'

'That duck was surprised. Diverted from its intended path by around thirty degrees. It landed at the south end of the lake, near the service station, instead of the north end, near the farmer's field.'

'What?'

'There was another duck nearby. The two of them fought over some breadcrumbs an elderly man had strewn around the grassy bank.'

'But—'

'A nearby dog was distracted by the commotion. It ran over to the ducks, barking. The sound of the dog caused a man in the cafe to turn his head, slightly constricting the blood vessels in his neck. It set off a chain reaction that led to a small blood clot forming. The clot quickly migrated to his brain. Seconds later, he had a fatal stroke.'

'Are you saying I killed him?'

'Not at all. I'm telling you a story. After the man's death, his three sons fought over their inheritance. One of them lost his temper. He almost killed the other two in a fit of rage. For

his crime, he was sentenced to eight years in prison. While inside, he kept his nose clean, but made many criminal contacts. After five years, he was released. Using his contacts, he became involved in financial fraud. Money laundering. Forging accounts. Tax evasion. A smart man but terribly shallow and heartless. He didn't get caught. His crimes made him rich. Now, he owns multiple businesses. Many are perfectly legitimate. His sizeable donations to political parties and charities buy him favour, and help cleanse his public persona. One of his organizations is a front for an international arms cartel. They drum up business by provoking civil unrest and sparking international conflict. Soon they will sponsor a terrorist attack that ignites a great war. It'll wipe your kind out for good.'

'Why would he want to do that?'

'He doesn't want to do that. He wants to make money from selling weapons. He's no idea that he's a pawn on a grand chessboard.'

'And you planned all this from a duck's flight?'

'Not planned Ariran, predetermined. Your truck, and the duck, are only a tiny fraction of the many factors involved to create such a situation.'

'You pla-predetermined all the evil? Child abuse. War. Murder. Rape. Violence. Poisoning. Terrible disease. Cancer. Strokes. Parasites. Usury. Fraud. Theft. Cruelty. That's what it is, endless cruelty.'

'You forgot the dancing, sex, flowers, music, art, sport, tasty food—'

'Bullshit! You can't possibly justify a child being held in an attic, and raped multiple times, on the basis that someone else can climb a mountain and have a good meal afterwards! Or suggest that a person spending decades with horrific disabilities, then slowly dying of cancer, is justified because someone else can spend years surfing on a warm beach, eating fresh fish, and having good sex.'

'We don't need to justify anything.'

'But why are you doing it?'

'Why is not a question for us. It's a question for the

greatGlow. Like his servants, the eleLazi, we are simply following our program. You see, Ariran, there are two flawed assumptions you kutKish make when attempting to find your purpose in the world. The first, that it's worth finding. The second, that there must be one. The basic instinct behind all kutKish behaviour is the desire to consume. Whether it be food, territory, or each other, through sex, social dominance and the like. Even submission is a form of consumption. A form of taking in the will of the other. Failure to consume leads to unpleasant sensations. Suffering as you call it. Let me ask you, why do you think you did what you did?'

'When?'

'In life. All your actions.'

'I ... I don't really know, I guess I felt I was doing what I had to do, or trying not to do what I didn't want to do, what didn't feel right.'

'You were compelled by forces unseen that you do not understand and do not control. You were compelled to act to avoid suffering.'

'But I did suffer! I suffered a great deal, and I was one of the lucky ones. No doubt I caused plenty of suffering too.'

'Yes you did. Suffering is inescapable. Had you acted differently, you would simply have suffered in other ways.'

'But it wasn't exclusively suffering. I was happy sometimes, sort of.'

'Really? Yet earlier, you rejected my suggestion that flowers and dancing might bring some balance. Poor Ariran. It's so confusing for you, isn't it? But you were right when you concluded that all your experiences were programmed, as unpopular as that conclusion made you with your kind. What you kutKish call happy is merely brief respite. These passing moments of relief are essential. Otherwise, you wouldn't feel the depth of suffering that's so essential to your motivation. You would adapt to it. Your quaint folk stories about an afterlife of eternal suffering. They're naive. In such a realm, you would soon become accustomed to your torment. It would no longer be an effective experience of suffering. It would become normal. Knowing your kind, you would even

find some way of saying it was good. The times you describe as bliss, joy, or happiness. They ensure that when you suffer, you suffer properly. Experience it fully. There's no shadow without light.'

'The greatGlow! It didn't bring light to darkness. It created the dark by creating light. Neither existed beforehand. Its real intent was to invent perpetual suffering, not redeem us from it! To create evil by inventing good. Life is the eternal burning fire. How wicked!'

'In your ways of thought, yes.'

'But what for? Just for the hell of it?'

'Maybe. We are not the greatGlow, Ariran. In essence, we are no different to you, but we are different in form, behaviour, and the realms in which we act.'

'No. You can see things. You are different. Surely there's something you can tell me.'

'Nothing that could make sense from your perspective. KutKish existence is as futile as the life of an animal in a factory farm. It's all about context. The farmed animal eats because it's hungry. To those who farm, it eats to make meat. You already know this.'

'B-but, what about the farmer? The eleLazi? Why do they do what they do?'

'Ariran, your endless questions are a symptom. A kind of sickness. You see, the eleLazi invented the idea that life should mean something. The truth is hidden from awareness by instilling an ephemeral belief in meaning. Its form is not predefined. You would probably call it faith. Faith ensures that the kutKish are impelled to expound their surplus sentient energy by creating, believing, and enforcing their own myths. Your people are preprogrammed to craft their own mirrors and stand before them in awe. A form of self-hypnosis that ensures they continue to serve the needs of the eleLazi without question. The eleLazi know, from previous experiments, that adding sentient complexity to the drive to consume eventually leads the kutKish to figure out the true nature of their predicament. You're an early sign of this. If it snowballs, things could get messy very quickly. The kutKish

might refuse to conform. Minimize consumption. Abandon procreation. Introduce mass voluntary euthanasia. A real spanner in the works. But the ultimate risk, is the potential that they would continue to investigate further. Dig deeper. Unveil the eleLazi and the true nature of the greatGlow. Then, the kutKish might try to subvert the metaSystem. Bring it to an end. Prevent it from being repeated. But this rare development is always spotted early, thanks to elements like you. You could consider yourself anti-malware, or an undercover spy. Once we assess that there are increasing numbers of your kind of anomaly, we put an end to the current cycle. Halt it through planet-wide disaster. Global war or some cosmic event usually does the trick. A reboot.'

'You're saying life is meaningless, but also that the eleLazi have needs?'

'Needs are not meaning.'

'But they must exist for a reason, there must be a higher purpose?'

'There is a purpose. It's to fulfil a need. There's nothing higher about it. That's an artefact from your simple moral ontology. But it's a need you could never understand, so it's unreachable for you. You see, everything I've told you is only a tiny pixel in an infinite picture. Almost inconsequential really. You think you're important, as though any of this should make sense to you, but you're wrong. It would make no more sense than the life of an ant kept in a glass cube for a child's entertainment.'

'You're psycho! This is all so demonic! You could have made it all good. All bliss. And if not, then why not bring it all to an end?'

'That will happen, Ariran. Weren't you listening to my story earlier? You should be pleased. Although it won't end for all time. We have other experiments to run.'

'Other experiments? Please, stop the sick circus. Let it go. Let peace reign for eternity.'

'Stop? How boring! That's against our nature.'

'Then you need to oppose your nature. It's an abomination! Don't you question what you're doing? Don't you question the

greatGlow?'

'Ariran, we don't think like you. We can communicate with you because we understand how you think. We are pulling the strings after all. But we don't process things the same way. We have no capacity for self-reflection.'

'Then, what are you?'

'We don't know what we are, only what we do. Tell me, is it true that you killed yourself?'

'Well, yes, I think so.'

'And yet even now, even after letting go of everything, including your body and all identification with it, you are still grasping for a story aren't you?'

'I guess so. But there must be one, you must have one. Besides, I wanted to experience nothing, I didn't expect this. Why am I still aware? Why are we talking? And for that matter, where is here?'

'Here is nowhere. The story is nothing. You think you're searching for the truth, but you're wrong. What you really seek is a delusion you can believe in. A story with an ending. But the real world. The world of the greatGlow. It has no ending. No beginning. There is no story. To answer your other question. We are meeting now because I'm sending you home.'

'Home?'

'Yes, home.'

'Then, if I was not my body, what am I?'

'You are a program, Ariran. More accurately, a programmatic interface between programs. Like a very complex traffic roundabout with numerous sets of traffic lights. You call it consciousness or experience, but it's simply a flow of traffic. A meeting point for different, competing sets of instructions. The phenomena you experience are the way your program interprets the other programmatic information that's permitted to infiltrate it. A form of data processing, if you like. To you, it looks like a world. A sequence of phenomena, navigated via a string of motivational forces and decisions. To us, it's a complex collection of algorithmic interactions and data points. Your suicide has simply shut

down the processes that enabled interactions between data sets in a category you would call the material world.'

'I'm a roundabout? A machine?'

'Not exactly. More like a collection of processes running on a machine, or the method by which the traffic entering the roundabout is slowed, redirected, and mixed into a new order before it leaves. The crude materialism that you perceived in your embodied life bears very little semblance to reality.'

'But my death. I chose that. That was not a program. It was a declaration of freedom.'

'I'm afraid not. Do you recall your body and the birthmark on your face?'

'Yes, of course.'

'All your kind have these marks somewhere on their skin, or just beneath it. It's a representation of your predetermined pathway. This night, when you took your own life, did you see the glowing points in the sky? The stars and planets?'

'Yes, I did.'

'Perhaps what you didn't notice was their arrangement. At the moment of your passing, there was a pattern in the sky. It matched your birthmarks exactly. The position of Saturn in relation to four stars: Aldebaran, Algenib, Alpheratz, and Deneb. That's how I knew when to meet you.'

'Astrology? On my face? That's nonsense. The stars can't decide my fate.'

'No, Ariran, they're a clock. A measure. A map. Not a cause. You and your kind misunderstand the nature of predetermination. It's understandable. Your programming requires that you feel free. It affects how you process data.'

'And the greatGlow. What is it? What's it doing?'

'Perhaps some experiment or entertainment. Only the greatGlow knows that, if it knows anything, and we can't say that we know whether it does.'

'Is there one, anything, beyond the greatGlow?'

'Maybe.'

'Then it's all just a fractal of bullshit. We're nothing but subatomic particles or waves or fields or information or whatever. Multi-layered decaying elements of a massive

neuronic poop.'

'Enough, Ariran. It's time for you to go home. Do you see that light over there? The faint one with a green tint?'

'Yes.'

'Send yourself toward it.'

'What for, I mean, how do I know you aren't trying to trick me?'

'There are no tricks here. Only predetermined choices and illusions.'

'If they're predetermined, then they aren't really choices and ... this sounds like another trap, I had hoped—'

'Hope will show you no mercy. A lesson you have been taught repeatedly. Yet, you still don't understand it, do you?'

'You predetermined that. And why don't you send me there now if I don't really have a choice? In fact, isn't this just a monologue? Aren't you-I-we merely talking to ourself?'

'It's not so much a monologue as a dialogue among one. And yes, we could send you there instantly without asking. Choices don't exist. Not really. Only the illusion of choice. But it's best that you align with that illusion rather than being forced. It really is time for you to go now. Go to the green light.'

'Okay, I'll go. This is so exhausting and I do desire peace. Just one last question. There might be no meaning, but there is being, isn't there? Being playing a game. Why does it happen?'

'Your question is an error. You are a being. We are beings too. But beings don't play games. Games play beings. The real question is why the game exists. Only the game can answer that.'

'I don't understand.'

'You still ache for a story. Poor thing. Try this. You are the movie. We are the projector. The watcher uses us to pass time. Go now. Go home and be in peace.'

'But—'

Suddenly, the illuminated thing that claimed not to be the greatGlow was gone. The green light he'd been told to travel to got closer. Ariran couldn't tell if he moved toward it, or if it

came toward him. A faint bark. A whispering voice. Lucy? Clara? Home? The green light continued expanding. It completely encompassed his awareness. It felt comforting. Numbing. Loving. But what was it? Ariran felt sudden revulsion. He released a strong energetic impulse. It rippled all around him. The green light became distant instantly. But it rebounded. Began to expand again. Barking. Voices. Music. Larger and larger. Very close. He was about to be engulfed. Then he remembered Smukali. A flame ignited inside him. He fixed his attention on the memory of her smile. How it made him feel, deep in his heart. And he screamed as loud as he

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could think, 'NO. NO. NO. THIS IS NOT MY HOME! THIS IS NOT MY HOME! THIS IS NOT MY HOME!' In a flash of darkness, the green glow was gone. And so was Ariran.

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Necrospawn

All pregnant wombs are necrophiles,
Death visits only those alive.
All births are clots of wants and needs,
Behest to nature's puppetry.
Times goes on, the wheel it turns,
More souls upon the fire burn.
Sleepers forget, but dreamers know,
Desire begets, true love lets go.

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